CLASSROOM
OF THE
ELITE
STORY BY
SYOUGO
KINUGASA
ART BY
TOMOSESHUNSAKU
NOVEL
5

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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
NOVEL 5

TACHIBANA AKANE
A third-year student like Horikita Manabu. Akane serves as student council secretary, and she's always hanging around the president.
"Do you seriously plan to change this school?"
"No! My instincts say I don't want you to be alone with him!"
HORIKITA MANABU
The Advanced Nurturing High School's student council president. He may be Horikita Suzune's older brother, but he's cold to his younger sister. He seems to have a rather high opinion of Ayanokouji, though.
"Hey, I wonder if Ibuki-chan's good at sports?"
"Hell if I know. All I know is that Horikita's gonna win, no doubt."
They didn't realize that Ibuki was highly athletic. Personally, I couldn't say for certain who would win.

"It's been quite a long time, Ayanaokouji-kun. It's been eight years and 243 days, actually."
"You're joking, right? I don't even know who you are."
"Heh. No, I suppose not. It's just me who knows you, after all."

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NOVEL 5

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9. THE TURNING POINT

POSTSCRIPT

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NOVEL 5

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku

Seven Seas Entertainment

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE VOL. 5

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Art by Tomoseshunsaku

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Chapter 1:
Sudou Ken's Soliloquy

To be completely honest, I ain't really a capable person. I know that much. After my mom abandoned us to go into the nightclub business, I decided to get stronger. I remember that my old man's back was always hunched. It made me sick to my stomach that he spent each day toiling away as a janitor. Being the idiot I am, I decided to give up on studyin' and go into sports.

At first, I liked sports you could play by yourself, like tennis and ping-pong, but I didn't really stick with those. I was good, but I knew I'd never become a top-tier athlete. Then I tried basketball.

I wasn't a team player or nothin', but somehow, I got seriously into playing basketball. And I just kept getting better. I was even recommended to a high school with one of the best basketball teams in the entire country. But I ended up getting in some trouble, and my recommendation got pulled. That was when I really understood the painful truth: I was trash, born from trash.

That was why I chose *this* school. A dream school that didn't cost any money and could guarantee even *my* future.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Shiranami Chihiro
CLASS:	First Year, Class B
STUDENT ID:	S01T004744
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	Art Club
DATE OF BIRTH:	November 28th

EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	C
INTELLIGENCE:	C
DECISION MAKING:	D
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	D–
COOPERATIVENESS:	C+

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

She has a calm, gentle demeanor, and makes a good impression on others. Her collaborative and academic abilities are average, but she lacks athleticism. Some improvement is necessary.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

Chihiro-chan is sweet. She's a soothing presence in class and is like everyone's mascot! Ichinose-chan, though, seems to find her a little suspicious.

Chapter 2:
The School Sports Festival Begins

"The students' surnames were the key to figuring out the VIPs' identities. They were assigned in the order of the animals of the zodiac."

We sat at a table all the way in the back of the crowded café, Pallet. Summer vacation had just ended, and I was seated with a bizarre crew that included Hirata, Karuizawa, and Horikita. We were trying to review the special exam that'd been held on the cruise ship during our vacation, comparing notes on the test that divided us up into groups based on the twelve zodiac signs.

"The rabbit is fourth in the zodiac. If you put the names of the students in the rabbit group in alphabetical order, it would be Ayanokouji-kun, Ichinose-san, Ibuki-san, and then Karuizawa-san," said Horikita.

"I see. In that case, yeah, I'd be fourth. That's why I was chosen as VIP," said Karuizawa.

She seemed impressed. At first glance, you'd have thought that the two girls sitting with me were completely incompatible, but Hirata's presence made the discomfort between them mysteriously disappear.

"But isn't that really, really simple? I mean, practically anyone could figure it out. Like, the fifth person in the dragon group was Kushida-san, so she was the VIP, right?" asked Karuizawa. She put a straw in her milk carton and sipped.

"It *was* that simple. However, figuring that out in the middle of an exam wasn't so easy. With only three VIPs in your own class, you wouldn't have had enough solid data to determine the system behind the selection," explained Horikita.

If we'd known the names of the three VIPs in another class, we might have seen the pattern. However, even if we'd had a theory about how the VIPs were chosen, it would have been risky. If we were off, we could have taken considerable damage.

Of course, on the other hand, if we'd bet the farm and won, we might've turned everything around in a single stroke.

"I'm worried about Class C, though. I think Ryuuen-kun figured it all out in the middle of the test," said Hirata. He was probably right.

"If that's true, then why did he mess up?" asked Karuizawa.

“I wondered about that, too. If he understood the rules, he should have discovered all the VIPs,” said Hirata.

Horikita offered a different perspective on the matter. “Though it appears that Ryuuen-kun rules Class C alone, perhaps that isn’t actually true. More than a handful of people are probably deeply dissatisfied with his dictatorship.”

“Yes. A rebellious student must’ve tossed out the wrong answer in direct defiance of Ryuuen-kun.”

Horikita and Hirata were onto something, but we still couldn’t be sure. If there was a traitor, Ryuuen would’ve searched for them relentlessly. Even if that person had deleted the email, Ryuuen would probably have gone so far as to check people’s private points.

“What do you think, Ayanokouji-kun?” asked Horikita.

Hirata and Karuizawa looked to me at the same time. I broke out coughing, discomfited by the force of their combined attention.

“Dunno. I honestly don’t have a clue,” I lied. Horikita and Hirata looked away, losing interest all at once. Only Karuizawa still stared at me. I met her gaze, and she diverted her eyes.

“In any case, our first priority is to cement this relationship. I’m glad we’re discussing this, Horikita-san and Ayanokouji-kun,” said Hirata.

Horikita had never cooperated with Hirata before. However, her attitude had finally begun to change after the two special exams. Being driven into a corner made her start to realize the truth: that she couldn’t do this alone.

“Well, we don’t really have a choice. The zodiac exam was a special case. If we assume that future exams may have similar elements, though, then a certain degree of cooperation will be necessary,” replied Horikita. “That said, you evaded Ryuuen-kun’s clutches quite well.”

The last part was aimed at Karuizawa, who’d been my group’s VIP, and managed to get through the exam without being discovered. Class D had been well rewarded for that victory.

“Well, I guess. I *do* have a surprisingly good poker face. Right, Yousuke-kun?” asked Karuizawa. She hugged Hirata’s arm and looked at him with upturned eyes. You’d never have thought that their relationship had been strained, though whether that was genuine or an act didn’t interest me.

Wait a minute—*Yousuke?* When had Karuizawa suddenly started calling Hirata by his first name? I kind of wanted to call him by his first name, too, but it was impossible. Hirata and Karuizawa had forged a

new relationship out of their complicated situation, which most likely made them closer friends. Hirata returned Karuizawa's smile, then turned to Horikita.

"I actually have a proposal. Want to hear it?" Hirata asked.

Horikita gave no response—her way of telling him to speak.

"First, to bring our class together, I'd like to rope in Kushida-san as an ally. I think she'll complement our group well and add qualities that the four of us lack. She could potentially unite a lot of the boys, starting with Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun."

"Unnecessary," replied Horikita. "I won't deny the fact that she has certain skills, but we can do anything she can on our own. That's why I selected you and Karuizawa-san. With your combined talents, we can solve any problem that faces us…unless you plan to be uncooperative, like a certain someone."

She side-eyed me. How rude.

"It's certainly true that Ayanokouji might not follow our lead," added Karuizawa. She and Horikita nodded, though Hirata did not.

"Look, you're mistaken if you think *I'm* the uncooperative one. I'm the guy most likely to quietly go along with a group. I'm exactly the sort of person you can control. I have no presence," I said.

"Those who claim that they have no presence usually cast long shadows," replied Horikita.

"Okay. So, are *you* someone with no presence?" I asked.

"Me? There's no way *I* could have no presence. How dare you? Do you take me for a fool?" she demanded.

"Uh…sorry."

The whole conversation was devolving into some half-baked comedy sketch, although Horikita didn't appear to be joking around. You could never quite tell when she was playing, but I thought she was definitely serious.

2.1

Our afternoon class became a two-hour homeroom period. When Class D's teacher, Chabashira-sensei, arrived, she began to instruct us in a detached, matter-of-fact manner.

"Starting today, classes begin again. However, from September to the beginning of October, we will be holding more physical education classes to prepare for the school sports festival. We'll distribute new weekly schedules, so please review them carefully. In addition to the new schedules, we'll also distribute materials related to the festival. Students seated at the front, please pass handouts to those behind you, and so on."

The moment Chabashira-sensei uttered the words "sports festival," the class erupted in an uproar. Some students were undoubtedly excited by the prospect, but just as many loathed the idea of anything focused on physical exertion.

"The details on the printed handouts can be found on the school homepage as well. Please refer to them if necessary."

"Sensei, is this festival another of the special exams?" Hirata asked, raising his hand.

We expected Chabashira-sensei to say, "Naturally," but her response was vague.

"You're free to interpret this however you wish. In any case, this event will massively impact each and every class."

The students who loathed exercise continued grumbling. At an ordinary school, you could find a way to sit out or skip a sports festival. If this festival affected the entire class's fate, however, then even the least athletic of us had to participate.

On the other hand, some students were really fired up about this. Particularly those who, like Sudou, were confident in their athletic abilities. This was probably the first exam that would let them contribute to the class meaningfully.

"Ayanokouji-kun, here!" While everyone else agonized over what was happening, Horikita—who'd been reading through the handout—pointed something out to me.

I flipped the page over and checked what Horikita was referring to. It was, rather unexpectedly, a description of the sports festival's testing method.

For an instant, I felt as though Chabashira-sensei was looking at me.

"Some people have noticed this already, but for this year's festival, we're going to divide all the students across all grade levels into two groups and have them compete against each other. You in Class D are assigned to the Red Team. Class A is also assigned to the Red Team, so they will compete alongside you," explained Chabashira-sensei.

Classes B and C were assigned to the White Team. It would be Red versus White.

"Whoa! Seriously?! We're really doing that?" shouted Ike. He'd probably assumed that this exam would pit all four classes against one another, same as always. This sports festival required a different strategy than we'd had during the special exam on the cruise ship. It demanded cooperation between students from different years.

Horikita appeared calm on the outside, but I was sure she was panicking internally. Her older brother, Horikita Manabu, was a third-year student from Class A. Depending on the circumstances, we might have to work with him.

"At least you have an opportunity to get in touch now, huh?" I asked her.

"Don't talk about that here," Horikita muttered.

She glared at me. Her pencil tip shook like a cornered rattlesnake's tail, and I wanted her to stop.

"First, let's review the sports festival's potential outcomes. I don't want to have to explain them to you repeatedly, so please listen carefully," said Chabashira-sensei.

She went over the text on the printout, tapping the paper forcefully to indicate where to look. Still listening, I lowered my eyes to the handout.

Sports Festival Rules and Team Division

The sports festival divides all students, across all grade levels, into two teams: Red and White. The breakdown goes as follows: Classes A and D are on the Red Team, Classes B and C are on the White Team.

Point Allocation for All Competitors (Individual Competitions)

Points will be allocated as follows: first place will be awarded fifteen points, second place will be awarded twelve points, third place will be awarded ten points, and fourth place will be awarded eight points. One point will be deducted for coming in fifth place, and one additional

point will be subtracted for each place below that. (During a team competition, the winning team will be awarded 500 points.)

Point Allocation for Recommended Competitors

Points will be allocated as follows: first place will be awarded fifty points, second place will be awarded thirty points, third place will be awarded fifteen points, and fourth place will be awarded ten points. Two points will be deducted for coming in fifth place, and two additional points will be subtracted for each place below that. (The final competition, the relay race, will offer three times the point values.)

Red Team vs. White Team Outcome

After reviewing the combined overall scores for each class, 100 class points will be deducted from the first-, second-, and third-year batches of the two classes on the losing team.

The Effect of Ranking by Grade Level

Fifty class points will be awarded to the class that scores highest in each of the three grade levels. Classes that achieve second place in their grade level will not see any changes to their class point totals. Classes that achieve third place in their grade level will have fifty class points deducted, and classes that achieve fourth place will have 100 class points deducted.

"Um, sensei, how many points does the winning team get? That doesn't appear to be written anywhere," said Hirata.

Chabashira-sensei's response to that naïve question was cruel and brief. "None. Their reward will be not having any points deducted."

Cries of agony sprang up all over the classroom. It was complete pandemonium. Of course, that was hardly surprising. Up until then, whenever there was an enormous risk, there had been an enormous reward to spur us on. However, that hardly seemed the case in this sports festival.

"Please keep in mind that points are awarded and subtracted, not just by team, but on a class-by-class basis. So, even if the Red Team wins, you'll still be hit by the 100-point penalty if Class D holds the lowest combined overall score," added Chabashira-sensei.

So, we didn't just need to worry about our team winning. Supposing we scored highest among the first-year classes, and received fifty points? If we lost to the White Team, we'd still get a 100-point penalty. If we ended up taking fourth place among the first-year classes *on top* of being on the losing team, we'd be penalized 200 points in

total.

Individual Competition Rewards (may be applied to the next midterm exam)

Students who achieve first place in an individual competition will be awarded either 5000 private points, or the score equivalent of three points on a written test. (In the event that a student accepts the test points, they will not be allowed to give those test points to another student.)

Students who achieve second place in an individual competition will be awarded either 3000 private points, or the score equivalent of two points on a written test. (In the event that a student accepts the test points, they will not be allowed to give those test points to another student.)

Students who achieve third place in an individual competition will be awarded either 1000 private points, or the score equivalent of one point on a written test. (In the event that a student accepts the test points, they will not be allowed to give those test points to another student.)

Students who score lowest in an individual competition will have 1000 private points deducted from their total. (In the event that a student has less than 1000 points, they will instead receive a one-point penalty on a written exam.)

Regarding Rule Violations/Foul Play

Read and comply with every competition's rules. Those who violate the rules will be disqualified. Anyone engaging in foul play may be forced to withdraw from the festival. In such cases, the school may render all previously awarded points invalid.

MVP Reward

The student who receives the highest total score across all competitions will be awarded 100,000 private points.

MVP Rewards for Each Individual Grade Level

The three students from each grade level who receive their grade's highest total score across all competitions will be awarded 10,000 private points.

At first glance, this sports festival appeared worse than previous tests we'd taken, but there was a wide range of potential benefits. We needed to pay close attention to the risks and rewards of the individual competitions. Information that hadn't been previously disclosed could trip us up.

“S-sensei, sensei! What are the perks you get for first or second place or whatever? What does it mean that we can receive points for written tests?” shouted Ike.

Perhaps because the situation was strange to start with, Chabashira-sensei let out a slight laugh—an unusual sight.

“It’s exactly what you think it is, Ike. In the sports festival, you can earn test points as a prize, which you can then apply to a written exam. You struggle with English and mathematics, right? Extra points would prove incredibly useful for you in the next test.”

The most athletic students among us looked especially excited about that. If they went all out in the sports festival, they could supplement their scores in the event of a failing grade. That wouldn’t do an excellent student like Hirata much good, but even in that case, private points were incentive enough. The three idiots aside, more than a few students were anxious about their academic abilities. Expulsion was always a possibility.

However, as we soon found out, there was no such thing as a free lunch.

After all competitions end, the school will calculate each student’s point total and assign penalties to the ten lowest-scoring students in each year. The exact nature of the penalties will vary depending on grade level, so please consult the homeroom instructor in charge.

That was a major red flag.

“Sensei, what kind of penalty would we get?”

“For you first-year students, the penalty would be a point deduction on your next written exam. The ten students with the lowest overall scores will each receive a deduction of ten points,” Chabashira-sensei explained.

“Whaaa…?! Seriously?!”

Now that we’d heard the rules, it was time to look at the different kinds of events in this sports festival. They were divided into two categories, “all participants” and “recommended participants.” “All participants” was exactly what it sounded like: an event that literally all the students in a class participated in. Individual events like the 100-meter dash fell into that category, as did group events like the tug-of-war.

Meanwhile, only certain select students would participate in “recommended participant” events. The word “recommended” implied that a person was nominated, but a student could put themselves forward if the rest of their class agreed. A single person could also

participate in a competition meant for multiple people. Events in the "recommended participants" category included the scavenger hunt, the mixed-gender three-legged race, and the 1200-meter relay race.

Point gains and losses were determined purely by the event results, but the combination of team competitions and individual competitions made the festival tricky. We had to be wary of our enemies, Classes B and C, but also mindful of our allies, Class A. Class D and Class A would be helping each other, but to get first place in the combined scores across every grade level, our own class needed to take the top spots in multiple competitions.

"Details of the events are noted in your handouts. There will be no changes whatsoever," said Chabashira-sensei.

"Ugh, this is crazy hard, though! This is on a completely different level than junior high!"

Events for All Participants
100-Meter Dash
Hurdle Race
Capture the Flag (boys only)
Ball Toss (girls only)
Tug-of-War (separate events for boys and girls)
Obstacle Course Race
Three-Legged Race
Cavalry Battle
200-Meter Dash
Events for Recommended Participants
Scavenger Hunt
Four-Way Tug-of-War
Three-Legged Race (mixed boys and girls)
1200-Meter Relay Race (mixed grade level, all three years)

Thirteen competitions in total—a grand lineup. The numbers indicated the order the competitions would be held in. There was some dissatisfaction over the large number of events for all participants.

"There would normally be, like, three or four events for a single person! Besides, is it even possible to do all these in one day?"

"I appreciate your concern, but the school already considered that," answered Chabashira-sensei. "No events require specific skills, such as cheerleading, dancing, or coordinated group gymnastics. The sports festival will be a thorough test of your general physical ability

and stamina."

The unathletic students' resistance was in vain. Chabashira-sensei had anticipated their every complaint.

"Another important thing to note is the participation table. Fill it out with the order you'll participate in, and I will submit it to the school on your behalf. I don't imagine any junior high has adopted a system like this, so do be extra careful not to make any mistakes."

"Wait. So, we can decide the order in which we'll participate? Exactly how much freedom do we have?" asked Hirata.

It was an obvious question, and Chabashira-sensei answered quickly. "Your class must come to a consensus on everything to do with the sports festival, such as which students will participate in which events. No changes will be allowed once the deadline passes, no matter the reason. The submission window opens one week prior to the festival and ends at 5:00 pm on the day before it begins. If by some chance you miss the submission window, you will be assigned randomly. So, be careful."

"Excuse me, but I have a question. Is that all right, Chabashira-sensei?" Horikita, who'd sat quiet until then, politely raised her hand.

"Feel free," replied Chabashira-sensei. She smiled thinly at the girl.

Both Hirata and Horikita understood how this school worked. The more questions they asked now, the better they'd understand later. Better safe than sorry.

"I realize that no further changes will be accepted once the submission window closes. However, in the event of someone's absence, what do we do? In the case of an individual competition, I assume that would be treated as an absence, but for group competitions? Especially in games like the cavalry battle and the three-legged race, we might not be able to compete at all if one important person is missing."

"Should you fall short of the minimum required number of people for competitions for all participants, you will be deemed unable to continue and disqualified," replied Chabashira-sensei. "For recommended-participant events, however, you are permitted to arrange a substitute—for a price. To establish a substitute, you must offer points as compensation."

We'd have to pay to prove we weren't cheating, huh?

"While we're on the subject…if an athlete's health suffers, or they're severely injured, will it be possible for that person to continue participating if they wish? Or will they have to stop and see a doctor?"

asked Horikita.

"We leave that to the students to decide for themselves. Knowing your own limits will be an indispensable skill in the working world. For instance, you can't simply take a day off just because you have a fever on the date of an extremely important conference," replied Chabashira-sensei.

So, personal responsibility might trump personal health if the stakes were high enough.

"However, if someone's health gets truly poor, then they'll have to drop out," Chabashira-sensei added.

"I understand. Well, how many points are needed to assign a substitute?" asked Horikita.

"A substitute requires 100,000 private points per competition. That's expensive or cheap, depending on your resources," replied Chabashira-sensei.

"I see. Thank you very much."

We could afford that, but it wasn't exactly cheap. Depending on the circumstances, though, a substitute could be necessary in the future.

"If there are no more questions, we'll wrap up," said Chabashira-sensei.

She looked around the classroom. Students glanced at one another doubtfully and whispered, but made no effort to speak up. This was likely our last chance.

"Next period's location will move to Gymnasium 1, where you'll meet with students from other classes and grade levels. That is all," Chabashira-sensei said flatly. She checked the time. "You have twenty minutes of homeroom remaining. You're free to use that time however you wish."

With the teacher's permission, the silent classroom exploded into chaos. Groups formed, all chattering about the sports festival on their own. Sudou, Ike, and Yamauchi gathered around Horikita.

"Let's figure this out, Horikita," said Sudou earnestly.

"Yeah, yeah, let's think of a way to win!" Ike added.

Horikita sighed deeply, looking at the boys as if they were someone else's problem. "Why do only guys like these come to me?"

"It's a sad fact of reality," I told her.

Though Horikita muttered a comeback, she seemed to take the matter seriously. She flipped open her notebook. "Fine. I'll hear you out for now," she stated.

"Yes! Yes!" Ike immediately raised his hand. Horikita pointed her

pen at him, urging him to speak.

"I'd like to have fun and win!" he shouted.

"That's not a valid opinion." Horikita smacked him down at once.

"Class D can win this," Sudou said confidently.

"I'm not really expecting you to dazzle with your logic, but I'll listen to what you have to say."

"I'm not sure about the 'all participant' stuff, but you know I'll enter the recommended-participant competitions. If I do that, we'll win," he answered.

"There is some merit to that suggestion. Within our class, you stand out as someone with superior athletic skill. It certainly wouldn't be a bad idea for you to participate in all the recommended-participant competitions," Horikita said.

I agreed, but Ike and Yamauchi seemed dissatisfied.

"We want to have a chance, too! Come on. If we place in the top three, we can get some points."

"So, you'd advance your personal agendas, even if that lessened Class D's likelihood of winning?"

"Well, that's a good point, but…it's just, like, we want a chance to win something!"

"When it comes to the recommended-participant competitions, you want people who are *good* at sports. You're not, Kanji," said Sudou.

"Hey, you don't know that for sure!" Ike shouted. "I mean, miracles happen all the time, right? 'Sides, this should be fair!"

"I suppose bringing the entire class into this discussion will complicate matters even further," said Horikita.

She might be able to argue Ike down, but other students probably wanted what he did. The potential rewards of winning were very attractive to poorly performing students. Those who were constantly at risk of expulsion probably wanted this chance so badly they could taste it.

"Sudou, I sympathize with your desire to participate in all the events," Horikita said. "However, that doesn't mean I can support throwing caution to the wind by entering you in every competition."

"Whaddya mean?" Sudou balked.

"Stamina isn't an unlimited resource. If you participate in one event after another, you will naturally become exhausted."

"But it's better to leave it to me than put forward someone unathletic, right? Even if I get tired out, I can still move better than those guys," Sudou huffed.

He glanced over at the guys—me included—and gave a snort. Ike and Yamauchi appeared frustrated, but said nothing.

“We’re not coming to any decisions right now. Let’s talk more in our next homeroom period,” said Horikita, quickly bringing our discussion to an end.

2.2

A crowd of over four hundred people, including instructors and students, gathered together in the gymnasium during our second homeroom period. Horikita scanned her surroundings restlessly. She was probably looking for her older brother, Horikita Manabu, who served as the student council president. However, with this many people around, she wouldn't be able to spot him easily.

If she loved her older brother that much, perhaps she should have taken the initiative to seek him out. But being vulnerable was harder than anything else for Horikita. Now that I thought about it, she'd never gone to meet with her brother before. He'd always been the one to initiate contact.

When we sat down on the floor, several students came forward. Everyone focused their attention on them.

"I'm Fujimaki, from the third-year Class A. It's been decided that I will assume command of Red Team."

Apparently, Horikita's older brother wasn't going to take charge. I would've thought that he'd take the lead, being student council president. This just made me wonder when he would make a move.

"I'd like to give the first-year students one piece of advice. The sports festival is extremely important. Your experiences here will most certainly be applicable to real life. In fact, many of your future exams may look like games at first glance. However, each and every one of them is a crucial battle in which you stake your survival at this school," said Fujimaki.

His words were somewhat vague, yet still helpful.

"You may not feel motivated right now, but we're going to try and win this thing. I want you to hold on to that feeling," Fujimaki continued. He looked around the assembled Red Team members once again before speaking. "The only competition which all classes from all grade levels will participate in together is the final event—the 1200-meter relay race. Aside from that, all the other events are divided up by grade level. So, please, feel free to gather and discuss your strategies, starting now."

In response to Fujimaki's words, the first-year students from Class A, led by Katsuragi, began to assemble in droves. The first-year Class D students, on the other hand, appeared to flounder. They felt nervous in

the company of such elites. In the first semester, Class A's grades had been overwhelmingly better than Class D's. None of us had even come close.

"Well, the circumstances may be rather bizarre, but I'm looking forward to working with you. I hope we can join forces without any problems," said Katsuragi.

"I feel the same way, Katsuragi-kun. I look forward to working with you," replied Hirata.

From Class A's perspective, there was no benefit in teaming up with the lowest-ranked class of all. However, if our classes didn't work together, we'd drag each other down. We weren't agreeing to trust one another like siblings, but we were making a pact not to get in each other's way.

"Hey, check out that girl," whispered Ike, standing beside me.

I understood why he was whispering. I felt the same way. He was pointing at a Class A student, a girl, whom I'd never seen before. She stuck out like a sore thumb, but no one said anything. It didn't feel like we *could* say anything right now.

"Every individual class has its own strategies, but—" Katsuragi just continued talking, blithely ignoring Class D's concerned looks and furtive whispers.

"So, you don't intend to hold a discussion?"

A girl's rising voice echoed through the gymnasium, interrupting Katsuragi. Everyone's attention switched to what was happening. The speaker was a first-year Class B student named Ichinose Honami. In front of her, almost an entire class was in the process of leaving the gymnasium. Among those students, Ryuuen Kakeru, Class C's leader, turned around with his hands in his pockets.

"You understand that I'm leaving out of goodwill, right? Even if I offered to cooperate with you, I can't imagine that you'd believe me. In the end, you'd just probe me for information to see whether I can be trusted, right? It's a waste of time," he said.

"I see. So, you're just saving us the hassle, then," replied Ichinose.

"Yep, that's it. You should be grateful."

"Hey, Ryuuen-kun. You really think you can win without cooperating?" asked Ichinose.

"Heh. Hmm, I wonder."

Ryuuen sneered and walked out of the gym, leading the Class C students away. The spectacle merely confirmed Class C's status as a dictatorship.

As Class D watched, Karuizawa's expression soured for just an instant. During the special exam on the cruise ship, she'd gotten in a scrap with Manabe and some other girls from Class C, which led me to discover her history as a victim of bullying. For just a moment, Manabe looked back at Karuizawa. Then she immediately averted her eyes, as if nothing had happened, and followed Ryuuen out.

"Class B seems to have it really rough, getting paired with Class C and all." The spectacle we'd witnessed was a reminder that Ryuuen really did hold all the power in his class.

Katsuragi offered Horikita some advice. "Since we'll be allies from here on out, I should warn you. Don't underestimate Ryuuen. He'll laugh while he attacks you in the same instant. Don't let your guard down."

"I appreciate the warning, but I wonder if you're speaking from personal experience," replied Horikita.

"I've warned you." Katsuragi left it at that and returned to the topic of the festival.

"I wonder if he's going to make a move right away," someone whispered, looking in the direction Class C had gone. It was the girl I'd been curious about a little earlier. She was petite, and sat all by herself, her eyes downcast. She held a thin cane. It was clear that she had trouble walking.

"That's Sakayanagi Arisu. She's disabled. Please be sensitive about that," said Katsuragi.

So, this girl was Class A's other rumored leader, who had supposedly split the students into two distinct factions between herself and Katsuragi. Although everyone around her was staring, the girl paid no attention to them. She had short, silver hair, a particularly eye-catching feature. I wasn't sure whether or not she dyed it. Her skin was pale, and her name—Arisu—reminded me of a certain mysterious girl who fell down a rabbit hole to Wonderland.

"Dude, she's super cute!"

I supposed it was no surprise that the Class D boys would be smitten by Sakayanagi. She was as cute as Kushida and Sakura, and had a dreamlike quality that made people instinctively want to protect her. Yet none of the boys made a move to hit on her or crack jokes like they normally would have. Though she appeared weak, you could sense her great strength of will.

Sakayanagi smiled at us, aware of the stir she'd created. "Unfortunately, I won't be very useful in this competition. I'm afraid I'll be consistently absent," she said. "Please accept my humblest apologies."

"You have nothing to apologize for. No one's going to give you a hard time over that," said Hirata.

"The school sure is harsh. They should've come up with some accommodation for you."

"Yeah, that's right. You don't need to worry!"

"Your kindness overwhelms me," she replied.

Contrary to what we'd expected, Sakayanagi seemed extremely polite, mature, and gentle. She gave no hint of aggression. However, Katsuragi watched her quietly. I could see from the way the Class A students arranged themselves that there was a clear line between Katsuragi's and Sakayanagi's followers. The class definitely had two factions. I'd considered Katsuragi's faction superior at first, but I wasn't so sure anymore. There were some boys and girls with Katsuragi, including Yahiko, but nearly all the students sat with Sakayanagi. Perhaps she was deliberately demonstrating her own power.

Sakayanagi had not participated in the island or cruise ship tests. Though the school hadn't made a statement about it, it was certainly possible that she'd incurred a penalty for not participating on the ship, yet she'd managed to gain this many allies. She had most likely earned her classmates' trust by steadily racking up various other accomplishments. Meanwhile, Katsuragi's own failures had probably affected his popularity.

After apologizing for her shortcomings, Sakayanagi showed no sign of wanting to speak further. Instead, she quietly observed Katsuragi, Hirata, and the others. Maybe I was overthinking it. Maybe she stayed quiet because she knew she wouldn't be of any use in the sports festival.

Katsuragi, ignoring Sakayanagi, continued to talk with Hirata. "I was thinking that it'd be best if we just keep out of each other's way. You don't mind, do you?"

"So, you won't share any details about the competitions you're participating in?" Hirata asked.

"Right. Letting that information slip might lead to unnecessary conflict down the road. Besides, constantly comparing ourselves to each other will only increase the divide between us," said Katsuragi.

"Yes, I suppose you're right. It's pretty hard to trust other people in this school, Katsuragi-kun. Also, even though we're allies in a way, I suppose there's no changing the fact that we're still competing with one another," replied Hirata.

He looked to the rest of our classmates for the final decision. No one voiced objections. Even Horikita didn't say anything, so she must've been convinced, too.

"At any rate, we'll need to meet sometime soon to discuss the group competitions. Is that all right with you?" Hirata asked.

"Yes, that should be fine. I'll consult with everyone else."

"Thanks. I'm counting on you."

They certainly didn't waste time. It seemed as though everything was going smoothly.

"What do you think the trick is here, Ayanokouji-kun? What are they playing at?" Horikita, on the other hand, seemed to have some ideas of her own.

"It's a sports festival. The school's probably trying to find out which students are athletic and which aren't."

"You're fundamentally correct, of course. But what's another factor, other than athleticism, that might influence the results?" asked Horikita. "Mere luck?"

"Luck, huh?" That suggestion was out of character for her.

"Unlike our other written and special tests, opponents on this test will be chosen at random. We don't know who'll take on whom. Luck is a huge factor."

True, much would be decided by the matchups. Even Horikita, who would normally win against 80 percent of the people in the

gymnasium, could lose if she happened to go up against someone from the remaining 20 percent. On the other hand, somebody very unathletic, who could only best a measly 10 percent of their opponents, might actually win if they were lucky enough to be matched up with someone even less athletic.

"I'm not talking about random chance, though," Horikita said. "I'm talking about something definite. I mean, a method that doesn't *just* rely on luck—one that still relies on athletic skill. On the island and cruise ship, there were secret clues and pathways we could have detected. This feels the same. This time, surely…" Maybe because of her shame over her mistakes on the island, Horikita was now even more obsessed with victory.

"What do you think makes this different from the previous special tests?" I asked.

"Different? I think it's the same kind of special exam."

"I won't deny that they're *similar*, but I doubt that the school considers them the same."

"I don't understand. You think it's different because we're cooperating with Class A this time? But we had to work with students from other classes on the ship, too."

"No, that's not it. The basic premise is different." I could tell that Horikita was growing frustrated with my coyness, so I explained. "The school has never once called the festival a 'special exam.' Only the first-year students have been calling it that. The teachers, including Chabashira-sensei, all referred to it as a sports festival. That third-year student, Fujimaki, called it that, too. The words 'special exam' weren't anywhere in the handout," I told Horikita.

She didn't seem convinced. "Well, why does that even matter? The structure that dictates how the sports festival plays out, and the large potential increase or decrease in points, make it function pretty much exactly the same as a special exam."

"That's true. But putting aside the fact that you can buy and sell test points, the regular written exams are meant to test our abilities. I think the sports festival is supposed to do the same with our *physical* abilities. It's not about employing cheap tricks, or coming up with a strategy or tactics—no, I think that the class that genuinely challenges themselves in this festival will demonstrate their true worth," I replied.

Of course, that didn't necessarily mean there'd be *no* cheap tricks. Once the sports festival began, however, things would be locked in place. It would be much like how, even though you could do things

before or after a written exam to help your results, you were rather limited during the exam itself.

"We need to make sure that we're prepared. That's all there is to it," I said.

"I already said that I want us to prepare. I definitely want Class D to win," Horikita retorted.

"Wrong. You're not talking about preparation. You're looking for loopholes."

"I don't understand the difference in our strategies," she replied.

"When I say 'preparation,' I mean figuring out who'll participate and in what order, knowing which students in other classes are athletic or unathletic, and so on. Finding out what order *they'll* participate in. And also, making sure that they don't discover those things about *us.* On the other hand, 'looking for loopholes' means trying to force someone to bow out of a competition or withdraw. Look, you want to win, right?" I asked.

"So, you're saying that we need to fight clean and fight hard to win?"

I didn't confirm or deny her interpretation of my words. If I had said that Katsuragi and Ichinose were heads, and Ryuuen and I were tails, which side of the coin would Horikita choose? I understood why she currently wanted to resort to "tails," considering that the people who'd won thus far were sneaks.

However, I was warning her precisely *because* going with "tails" in the sports festival would be extremely difficult.

"What you do is entirely up to you. What advantage do you think Class D has right now, Horikita?"

"Well, a dispute between Classes B and C will probably help us."

I had to address the real problem. Horikita Suzune lived her life in such solitude that she had tunnel vision. "You're not thinking big enough," I said.

"Do you think we should dismiss the fact that Ryuuen-kun refused to cooperate with Class B? I think that's a positive thing for us."

"Do you *really* think that?"

"Well, they might still reconcile and work together. It's not as though Ichinose-san particularly *likes* Ryuuen-kun, but for the sake of victory, she might put aside her own feelings. Can't we acknowledge that it's a good thing for now, though?"

"That's exactly what I mean by 'not thinking big enough.'"

"That's rude. Fine, do enlighten me."

“What do you know about Ryuuen? He’s always looking to win. No matter how he behaves, or how polite he is, he’s always coming up with strategies. So, why did he suddenly refuse to cooperate with Class B? Do you think he never considered it?”

“Wait. Are you saying that Classes B and C are working together behind the scenes?”

“Our relationship with Class B is different than Ryuuen’s. There’s a good chance that he has a plan in place. If he didn’t, he’d have no reason to leave. Even if that was a bluff, on the surface, he would gain more by talking with Class B, right?”

“I don’t think that’s right. It seems unlikely,” replied Horikita.

“So, because earthquakes and fires are unlikely, there’s no need to have emergency measures in place, just in case?”

“That’s—”

“I think that Ryuuen has, at the very least, one or more tactics in mind.”

“But if that’s true, it’s crazy. We only just learned about the festival. To have a whole plan in place so soon…”

“That’s why we need to understand his kind of crazy. What would a frontal attack from Ryuuen look like? What loopholes could he find? Can *we* come up with something similar? Are there precautions we can take? We have to think like that to rise to Class A’s level,” I said.

I’d been studying Ryuuen’s strategies and thought processes ever since the fight that nearly got Sudou expelled. Could Horikita still not see that?

I was looking forward to finding out just how far ahead she could think.

2.3

After class finished for the day, I remained in the classroom alone. Outside the window, I could hear students engaged in their club activities. With the sports festival drawing near, each and every one of them was in high spirits. No one slacked at all in their daily training regimen.

I plugged in my earphones and opened the file I'd received earlier on my phone. "I see…"

I basically had a good understanding of the situation now. I'd thought that I might have to lay a few traps, but it seemed that wouldn't be necessary. Pleased with this turn of events, I decided to return to my dorm.

As I passed through the main gate, I ran into Chabashira-sensei. She was spraying water around with a hose.

"You stayed behind longer than usual, Ayanokouji."

"I suppose you're right. Are you on duty today?" I asked.

"Something like that," she replied. She kept spraying water in a manner that suggested she was used to the task. "Working adults tend to multitask, unlike children. That's especially true now that the sports festival is imminent. Anyway, what were you doing today? This is the first I've seen you roaming around after class alone."

“Don’t you think that’s an exaggeration?”

“Are you prepared for the sports festival?”

“I think the last homeroom explained everything, more or less. Didn’t it?”

“In your case, I would have thought that you’d already have some eccentric idea or strategy in place,” she said.

“No, nothing like that,” I told her.

“Nothing? But—”

When her eyes met mine, she stopped talking. Discussing these things publicly wouldn’t help anyone.

“I haven’t forgotten what you told me, sensei. However, I’m free to decide my own path.”

“Yes, you’re certainly right. I shouldn’t interfere with you unnecessarily. But if you don’t show me some results soon, I’ll stop covering for you. It goes beyond the scope of an ordinary teacher’s duties, after all,” she replied.

I didn’t know what she expected from me. I shouldn’t have gotten myself tangled in such an aggravating situation. No…really, this confrontation had just been a matter of time. It would come to a head sooner or later.

“Excuse me.”

“Sure. Take care.”

Nice of her to urge me to “take care” on my arduous return trip of a couple hundred meters.

I went back to the dorm.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Kaneda Satoru
CLASS:	First Year, Class C
STUDENT ID:	S01T004662
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	Art Club
DATE OF BIRTH:	January 9th

EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	B
INTELLIGENCE:	C+
DECISION MAKING:	C
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	D–
COOPERATIVENESS:	C

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

His objectivity is praiseworthy, and he is admirably calm. His low capacity for emotional expression is a drawback, but his academic abilities and personal charm are higher than the national average. I'd like him to improve in areas where he is lacking.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

We would like to see him take initiative with the other students in class, for their sake.

Chapter 3:
Class D's Objective

We began making comprehensive preparations for the sports festival, which was only one month away. The teachers said we could use the weekly two-hour homeroom period as we wished, and Hirata, who was the closest person we had to a leader, took the initiative. Chabashira-sensei moved toward the back of the classroom and didn't say a word. She probably intended to watch.

"Before we start practicing, we need to decide the order we'll participate in, and who will enter the recommended-participant competitions. I've been thinking about this for a while," said Hirata.

"Okay, but when you say 'decide,' how exactly *are* we going to decide?"

"Good question. For example, in the events for all participants, we __"

Hirata took a piece of chalk and began writing on the blackboard as he spoke. He seemed to be good at this sort of thing. He put two headings on the board, "Raising Hands," and "Ability," then explained what those meant as he wrote down supplemental information.

"This is a rough outline, but I think that everything boils down to these two approaches. The 'raising-hands' system lets people nominate themselves to participate in competitions. The 'ability' system identifies everyone's individual talents, and seeks to assign them to maximize efficiency."

Hirata continued, "Both approaches have their pros and cons, of course. The strength of the raising-hands system is, naturally, that everyone gets to voice their wishes. The downside is that, if people's choices contradict each other, well, not everyone is going to get what they want. The strength of the ability system is that we can expect a higher chance of victory than we would with the raising-hands system. However, because the ability system favors the most athletic people in the class, it reduces the other students' chances of winning at something. That's the gist of what I've come up with so far, but if you happen to have any suggestions, I'd love to hear them."

Even the least intelligent among us could understand each system's pros and cons. Most everyone was ready to go along with Hirata, especially since no other proposals had been made.

“We should obviously decide based on ability, shouldn’t we? I mean, the only one who knows a person best is himself, right?” said Sudou. “If I win, then it’s more likely our class wins. That puts us way ahead.”

His words were confusing, but true. Sudou’s athletic ability would be integral to winning the sports festival.

“Well, it makes me kinda mad, but I suppose you’re right,” a girl muttered.

The boys also murmured in agreement with Sudou. “I’m really not that great at sports. If Sudou’s okay handling the recommended-participant events single-handedly, I’m fine with that.”

“Then it’s decided, right? I’ll do all the events for recommended participants,” Sudou declared.

“If everyone’s okay with that strategy, then I suppose the recommended participant in every category will be—”

“Wait.” Horikita cut in just before Hirata approved the proposal. “I’ve got a supplementary proposal.”

The other students turned to look at her.

“If we have to choose between these two approaches, then I agree that we should go with the ability system. However, that single tactic isn’t guaranteed to carry us to victory,” explained Horikita.

“Sure, that’s true,” said Hirata.

“I agree that the most athletic students should take part in events for recommended participants. But, even in events for all participants, we should group the people who have the best chance of winning. That way, we maximize everyone’s potential. Put simply, the strongest, fastest students should be grouped together,” said Horikita.

“Hold on a minute. Won’t that leave slower people high and dry?” Shinohara was the first to object. “Privileges only go down to third place. I don’t want to throw away my shot.”

“Your personal feelings are irrelevant. It’s for the sake of the class,” replied Horikita.

“I know it’s for the class’s sake, but I don’t want to lose out on private points.”

“If the class wins, the reward will be ample—easy to divide among us. Is that not enough for you?”

“I don’t want to miss out on individual rewards, like earning test points!”

“I understand your desire. However, your logic confuses me. If you just studied ahead of time, before an exam, you wouldn’t need to

rely on those privileges," said Horikita. "Besides, you probably wouldn't win anything anyway. I mean, with your lackluster athletic ability, it's not as though you'll place in the top three."

"Not everyone is as smart as *you*, Horikita-san. Don't just lump all of us together," snapped Shinohara.

"Then just study longer every day. I don't want to hear your excuses anymore."

Supporting voices rose throughout the classroom, all in favor of Horikita's logic. The athletes, like Sudou, were particularly on board with her plan. However, Shinohara still looked annoyed, and she probably wasn't the only one.

"Enough already, Shinohara. If we lose because of you, will you take responsibility? Huh?" Sudou, normally the worst in terms of academic ability, now beamed with hope and a sense of leadership.

"That's…ugh."

"Honestly, what a pain," Horikita muttered in my direction. "It's like you're not even paying attention. Instead of messing around on your phone, how about you try coming up with ways for us to win?"

"Well, if I just leave it to you and Hirata, you'll sort out our problems, right?" I replied. Still, I turned my phone off and placed it in my pocket. The discussion appeared to be over—or so I thought.

"Hey, excuse me? I object to this, too. You're okay with sentencing the unathletic students to lose, like Shinohara said? You think we can all come together in a situation like this?" Karuizawa spoke up, supporting Shinohara. She glared at Horikita.

"I've said as much. Do you understand my logic?"

"No. I don't get it at all. Hey, what do you think, Kushida-san?" asked Karuizawa.

Kushida had been strangely quiet during the meeting. She seemed slightly surprised, but spoke after a moment. "It's tough. I've been thinking about how both sides feel. Like Horikita-san, I want us to succeed as a class. But, just like Shinohara-san said, everyone should have a chance to win. If there were some kind of middle-ground solution, that would be ideal. A strategy we could all get behind."

Once Kushida was done, there were a lot of noises of assent. Horikita seemed to have anticipated this idea.

"Of course. I have a compromise that should be agreeable to both sides. Students who place at the top, and don't need to boost their test scores, will use the private points they win to boost the test scores of students who place at the bottom. The entire class will share in the

gains and losses of private points from the festival. I trust there will be no complaints?" asked Horikita.

So, in exchange for lowering our chances of victory across the board, we less-athletic students would also offset the risks in case we were defeated. The bottom ten students across each grade level would still be in trouble, though.

"Oh, yeah, that'd be fine," said Sudou with a disdainful snort, as if he were calling the opposition pathetic whiners.

"But that's just for points. We're still losing out on chances to win the big prize. What does everyone think about that?" Karuizawa wasn't letting this go. She looked over to her group of girls.

"If Karuizawa-san objects, then so do I, I guess." One after another, the girls followed her lead.

"You're objecting just because *she* objected? That's completely illogical. This is an exam. It's only natural that we focus on a winning strategy. The other class definitely isn't weighed down by morons like you," grumbled Horikita.

"You just don't get it, do you, Horikita-san? I hate this plan, and the other girls hate it, too. So, you need to take our opinions into account. We have to make these competitions fair," said Karuizawa.

"Calm down, both of you," said Hirata. "If we can't agree, then we've got to have a majority vote."

This had probably been inevitable.

"I think we should vote," continued Hirata.

"If Yousuke-kun says so, then I agree," said Karuizawa.

"Fine. This isn't the time to fight amongst ourselves. At any rate, I've offered my opinion. I hope you'll all make the right decision," said Horikita.

She sat down in frustration and glared at me. "Ayanokouji-kun, can't you tell Karuizawa-san to shut up?" she huffed.

"Uh, no. There's no way I could do that," I said.

"You've been talking to her lately, though. Haven't you? Isn't that why she's getting carried away?"

"No. Karuizawa's always been like that," I replied.

"That's certainly true," Horikita muttered. She couldn't hide her irritation with Karuizawa, whose opinion lacked logic, or with the girls who let someone else lead them around.

"Now then," said Hirata. "We have Horikita's proposal, which focuses on ability, and Karuizawa-san's, which prioritizes the individual. How about we decide which plan we prefer by a show of hands? If

anyone finds choosing a side difficult, they can abstain."

Horikita wanted to win, while Karuizawa wanted everyone to feel valued. The class's future would depend on whether people used their heads or their hearts. Of course, I myself had zero interest in the outcome.

"All right. All those in favor of Horikita-san's plan?"

"Yeah. I agree with Horikita's plan, of course," said Sudou. "It's about winning. When winners win, we all win. Ain't that a good thing?"

Sudou raised his hand. Those who had no confidence whatsoever in their athletic abilities, like Yukimura and Sakura, followed his lead. But the more capable students, along with Karuizawa's group, didn't raise their hands.

"Sixteen votes, then. Thank you. You can put your hands down."

"Wait a minute, Ayanokouji-kun. Don't tell me *you* agree with Karuizawa-san's plan?" said Horikita, who realized that I hadn't raised my hand.

"Relax. It's my policy to abstain from voting."

"In that case, you could just have voted for my plan," she growled.

"Your plan isn't necessarily right, is it?" I asked.

"I can't understand you. Giving the class the best-possible chance of winning will ultimately result in netting a lot of private points. Even if we only won a few matches here and there, the points would be significant. If you say that's wrong, perhaps you can give me a clear reason why?"

"I didn't say you were wrong. I'm just saying it's not the only answer," I replied.

The students used as sacrificial lambs, sent out to be destroyed by strong opponents, would finish the sports festival without earning any points at all. Horikita did understand *that* much, at least. But she also thought it was a necessary sacrifice in order to win.

"The other students aren't all as ambitious as you," I told her.

"All right. Next, we have Karuizawa-san's plan. Anyone in favor of *this* plan, to win when we need to and have fun when we want to, please raise your hand," said Hirata.

Along with Karuizawa's group, other students began raising their hands.

"And the results of the majority vote are…sixteen votes for Horikita-san's plan, and thirteen votes for Karuizawa-san's. It's safe to say that everyone else abstained from voting?"

Karuizawa hadn't won votes with a well-articulated plan. Rather, she relied on her installed support base to do what it could. Apparently, most students believed that Horikita's plan was realistic and efficient.

Class D's strategy would be, not to participate as individuals, but to win as a class.

"……" Since Karuizawa had approved a majority vote, she couldn't complain now.

"Then it's decided," said Horikita. "Now, Hirata-kun, I'll leave the rest to you."

I didn't think we'd necessarily made a bad choice. Unathletic students wouldn't be taking the initiative in the first place. Inevitably, those asked to fill the recommended-participant positions would be jocks like Sudou and Hirata.

"So, regarding the number of participants for recommended-participant events…" Hirata continued.

"I'll participate in every competition. If anyone's got something to say about that, then they can meet me outside, and we'll talk face-to-face," Sudou declared. He had one card, and he was playing it all the way. Furthermore, he apparently intended to force anyone who complained to surrender. Too aggressive, but the strategy seemed effective, since no dissatisfied grumbling could be heard.

"I will also compete in as many events as possible." As expected, Horikita volunteered herself. Karuizawa's face stiffened slightly. The girls around her quietly whispered in one another's ears, and I wondered if they were badmouthing Horikita.

The self-nominations and recommendations began pouring in, one after another, and soon the recommended participants were decided. Sudou would compete in every competition, just as he'd declared. Other students who were good at sports, like Kushida and Onodera, also offered to participate, in addition to Horikita and Hirata. However, we had only filled about a third of the events for all participants. The rest of the spots remained open.

"Hey, Kouenji. Ain't you gonna cooperate?" asked Sudou, glaring daggers at him. Even Sudou recognized that Kouenji possessed potential equal to, if not greater than, his own. "You didn't raise your hand earlier."

"I have no interest in this. You people do what you like."

"Stop screwing around, you jerk."

"I assure you, I am not 'screwing around.' I have no reason to let you bully me into anything," replied Kouenji. Yep, he was never going

to change.

"We don't need to decide everything right here and now, Sudou-kun. Kouenji-kun must have his reasons." Hirata tried to deescalate the situation. "At the very least, we've decided what the class's strategy will be, and who wants to participate in individual competitions. I think that it would be best to take our time with the rest."

With that, the discussion came to an end.

3.1

After class, I had some free time. I decided to contact a certain person before heading back to the dorm. As I rose, I exchanged looks with Karuizawa.

She must not have understood my intentions, because she left the classroom with two of her friends. Giving up, I grabbed my bag and started to head back to my dorm alone, like always. I left roughly one minute after Karuizawa.

Upon descending the stairs, however, I found her seemingly waiting for me, standing alone by the main entrance. “Wait,” she said.

“I thought you left.”

“I thought you had something you wanted to talk about, so I waited. Was I wrong?”

I couldn’t help my surprise. “I do, I suppose.”

“Well, I have something to talk to you about, too. Mind hearing me out?”

“Go ahead.”

“That message you sent me… What are your real intentions?”

She showed me her phone. The text displayed on the screen read, *“No matter what, object to Horikita’s plan. Then ask Kushida for her opinion.”*

I’d instructed Karuizawa to do that in the middle of class.

“When it comes to improvising, you’re quite fast on your feet. You did very well,” I told her.

“Really? You know, I actually agreed with Horikita-san’s plan. I don’t understand why you had me call on Kushida-san, either. What are you playing at?” she asked.

“If you worry over each and every thing I do, you’ll never know peace. Besides, I’m under no compunction to answer your questions. Understand?” I asked.

“So, I should just do as I’m told, like a loyal dog, and never ask why. Got it.”

“Exactly.”

Karuizawa didn’t seem pleased, but didn’t object further. “One more thing. You didn’t raise your hand. Which choice did you think was right?” she asked.

“They could both be right, I guess. Everything depends on the

individual, anyway."

"That's not an answer."

"I have a policy of ignoring questions trapped in the limited 'either-or' binary," I said.

"Huh? I don't get you. What do you even *want*, anyway? Are you just trying to wreak havoc on everyone? Or are you seriously thinking about getting from Class D to Class A?"

"Horikita seems to believe I'm fighting for the latter, at the very least."

Karuizawa glared, as if to say, *That's not what I asked.* "I wasn't asking what Horikita-san thinks. I want you to knock off the space-cadet act and just tell me what you're after."

"I see. Well, I'm not personally interested in reaching Class A. It's just that I think it might benefit me if our class rises to the top," I said.

"Wait, what does that mean? What's the difference?"

I decided not to mention my bargain with Chabashira-sensei.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. So, I'm taking several precautions to make you believe down the line. One of our classmates will betray us during this sports festival. They'll leak internal information from our class," I said.

"Wait, what?! Are you being serious right now?!" Karuizawa was incredulous.

"When the time comes, you'll understand…what I'm seeing, what I can see," I told her.

"Huh?! Tell me what's going on!"

"I can't right now. But when the time comes, I will. Right now, you should go. We're drawing too much attention here."

"You don't need to tell me that. If I were seen hanging out with a weirdo like you, my social cred would plummet. But…even if someone *does* betray the class, we'll be okay. Right?" she asked.

"Yes. I've prepared."

Looking dissatisfied, Karuizawa turned and left. I watched her walk away and sighed to myself. Class D's strategy was in motion, as was my own personal plan.

Now then, I wonder what Class A has in mind? Considering Katsuragi's personality, their strategy would be solid. But Sakayanagi would be good for the White Team, of course, and also for Class D.

Imagine a hypothetical situation with two people and only one life-saving apparatus—let's say a life jacket, meaning that only one of the two people can live. One person is able-bodied, and one disabled. If

the able-bodied person chose to save themselves, they could probably take the life jacket by force with relative ease, due to the other person's disability. The world is cruel. A crisis tends to bring out the worst in us.

That said, just because Sakayanagi wasn't physically active didn't mean she was harmless.

"Even so…"

Karuizawa was better at reading people than I'd imagined, probably because of her past. Satisfied with the completion of some rather unexpected business, I decided to head back.

3.2

There was a lot to do before the sports festival. Our physical education classes would be free periods from here on out, granting students permission to practice however they wanted to.

Hirata submitted a request to the school and obtained a device for measuring grip strength, which he brought to our P.E. period the next day. In line with Horikita's plan, we would prioritize ability. Hirata's device was simple, but should help. Quite a few of the boys' competitions would require pure power.

"Okay, let's line up. How about we measure the grip strength of our dominant hand? I'll record the results. I borrowed two of these, so we can split up to save time."

Hirata handed the devices to the people standing at his left and right: Hondou and Yukimura. Sudou, who apparently didn't like that, snatched one device for himself.

"Let's start with me, Hirata. That'll set a high standard," he said. His logic didn't track, so he probably just wanted to showcase his own strength.

"Um… Well then, let's have Sotomura-kun stand next to you and take his measurement simultaneously, Sudou-kun," replied Hirata.

"Check it out, Ayanokouji. This is what a real man looks like. Uraaah!" said Sudou, with a suitable bellow.

His shoulders shook while he tightly gripped the device in his right hand. The numbers on the digital readout shot up rapidly. In an instant they climbed to 50, then 60, then over 70. In the end, the number on the digital display was 82.4 kilograms. Everyone around us went crazy.

"What the heck, dude? You're stupidly strong!"

"Heh. It's just 'cause I train all the time. Only natural. Hey, come on. You do it, Kouenji." Sudou displayed his score to Kouenji, almost as if trying to provoke the other boy.

"I'll pass. Ignore me." Kouenji polished his fingernails and blew on them.

"What? You scared of losing to me or something? Guess that's understandable. Heh!" It was an obvious jab, but Kouenji didn't respond. "Tch. Oh, hey. Ayanokouji."

Sudou shoved the device into my hand.

“No thanks. I’ll do it later.”

“Huh? Come on, don’t mess around. We gotta do it in order.”

Coming from Sudou, that was rich—82.4 kilograms was a considerably high number. But it was also true that I was next in line. I wondered what the average value was for a first-year high school student. I’d used grip strength measurement devices hundreds of times before, but never once had I heard the average for people my age. I only had my own personal records.

“Hey, Sudou. What do you think the average would be for a high school student?” I asked.

“Huh? I dunno. Maybe, like, around 60?”

“Around 60, huh?”

I grasped the grip strength measurement device so that I could see the monitor. Grip strength wasn’t simply proportional to your arm’s thickness, though of course, it wasn’t completely unrelated, either. A bunch of muscles known as the “flexor carpi radialis” and the “brachioradialis” in your forearm were most important. The forearm muscles contracted, pulling on the tendons, and thus bending the fingers. The idea was to improve grip strength by training those muscles.

If you had a certain amount of muscle mass, depending on your degree of training, you could exceed a grip strength of 100 kilograms. Of course, you would need to spend a lot of time training to achieve that.

I gripped the lever, slowly applying force. Once I passed 44, I started to make minute adjustments to my grip strength. Once I passed 55, I further adjusted my grip, and once my grip strength reached just slightly over 60, I stopped adding any more force.

“That’s it. I can’t go any further.”

I released my grip on the device and handed it over to Ike, who stood next to me. Then I went to give Hirata my result.

“My grip strength was 60.6.” I delivered my report casually.

“Heh. You’re pretty strong, Ayanokouji-kun,” replied Hirata. He gave me a smile, as though he were impressed.

“Huh? Wait, isn’t that around average?”

“I think the average is lower than that, actually. 45 or 50?” mused Hirata.

“Hirataaaa. I got a 42.6. Can you give me a few tiny bonus points and make it 50?” asked Ike. That wasn’t a tiny bonus.

Hirata, smiling wryly, wrote down 42.6 in his notebook. Sotomura

got 42, and Miyamoto, who went afterward, got a 48. There were certainly a lot of people scoring under 50.

"I see. So, 60 was high, then."

I shouldn't have asked someone like Sudou what the average was. I'd thought that by placing my strength squarely in the middle, I'd be able to avoid participating, but I made a serious miscalculation. At this rate, I might be required to enter some recommended-participant events.

Kouenji aside, I ended up placing second in the class. I'd definitely screwed up. Next came Hirata in third place with 57.9. Sudou couldn't hide his disappointment in our classmates.

"Man, I can't rely on a single one of you. The next best is Ayanokouji? This might as well be over."

His casual rudeness could be stunning sometimes.

After the boys finished taking their measurements, we handed the devices to the girls. Since there would be mixed guy-and-girl competitions, knowing everyone's strength would be necessary.

Hirata filled out names for recommended-participant events based on the results he collected. "Okay, so we can simply go in order, based on grip strength, for the tug-of-war and the four-way tug-of-war. That'll be Sudou-kun, Ayanokouji-kun, Miyake-kun, and me."

"What exactly is a four-way tug-of-war, anyway? I ain't ever heard of that," said Sudou.

"I haven't heard of it before, either, so I looked into it. It's pretty much exactly what its name says. It's a tug-of-war competition in which four people are chosen from each of the four classes, for a total of sixteen people. It sounds like it's a tug-of-war contest where those sixteen people pull simultaneously," said Hirata.

Unlike in a normal game of tug-of-war, where you could just rely on your strength, some tactics would be necessary. Hirata wrote down the four-way tug-of-war participants in his notebook.

"Hey, Hirata, are we not getting any more chances to enter events?"

"Oh no, it's not like that. It's just, well, I think that competitions like the scavenger hunt are based more on luck than athleticism," replied Hirata.

"Luck? So, how are we going to decide that?"

"Simple is best. How about we go with rock-paper-scissors?" Hirata suggested.

Of course, I had no desire to play. I prayed I'd lose, but ended up

winning in the first round. I prayed even harder that I'd lose as I went into the second and final rounds, but ended up winning again. Three boys, two girls: we had five students, picked by sheer luck.

"Ayanokouji-kun, Yukimura-kun, Sotomura-kun, Mori-san, and Maezono-san. You five," said Hirata. Adding Sudou, that made six of us who would participate in the scavenger hunt.

"Alas! I-I have been chosen to participate in the scavenger hunt? Alack!" the Professor wailed with great dramatic flair. "Why, oh why did I throw rock at that moment? Alas."

"I'm so jealous!" whined Ike.

How interesting. What to someone was misfortune was a dream to another.

I would've been happy to give Ike my spot, but that would probably lead to an argument, so I decided not to bother. Besides, people like the Professor clearly didn't want to participate.

Pretty soon, Hirata completely filled the roster for every event. "All done." He closed his notebook, and the class let out a sigh of relief. However, this roster was temporary. Depending on how practice went, and what we learned about other classes, we could still make changes.

"This information is top secret, so everyone, please only make note of your events and your partners. No photographs," said Hirata.

He really had thought of everything. One careless picture of the notebook, and there was no telling how far that information could spread. As Hirata's notebook was passed from person to person, Horikita spoke to me.

"What's the matter, Ayanokouji-kun? You look more somber than usual."

"Many participants were chosen against their will," I told her.

"There's nothing to be done about that. In our class, there's an extremely wide gap between the athletic and unathletic students," she replied.

"That's certainly true."

But the roster wasn't set in stone yet. If a more suitable participant appeared prior to the festival, I could probably switch with him or her. I'd be more than open to handing over my burdens. In fact, I'd absolutely *love* to hand them over.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Totsuka Yahiko
CLASS:	First Year, Class A
STUDENT ID:	S01T004681
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	None
DATE OF BIRTH:	May 12th

EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	C
INTELLIGENCE:	C
DECISION MAKING:	D
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	D
COOPERATIVENESS:	B

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

We've determined that, although he isn't an outstanding student, he is a natural leader whom others tend to follow. He also seems to have unusual worldly wisdom.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

He idolizes his classmate, Katsuragi, another class leader. At present, there are no problems with his behavior.

Chapter 4:
Everyone's Calculations

Starting from our next homeroom period, we'd be practicing independently to prepare for the sports festival. During Class D's free period, we changed into gym clothes and made our way to the athletic grounds.

"Whoa, check it out." Ike, wearing an unpleasant expression, stared at the main school building. Several students were watching us through the windows of their classroom.

"Hey, they're from Class B, right? Guess they're already spying," mused Ike.

"Class A is checking us out, too."

If we wanted to train in such a conspicuous place, it was only natural that we'd be watched. Even if we held back, so the others wouldn't see our true skills, that would only hamper our practice and hurt us in the end.

"They started right away." Horikita had also noticed the curious stares.

For my part, I was more worried about Class C. Not a single one of them was looking at us. It was like they were saying that Class D wasn't any threat to them.

"Are you worried about Ryuuen-kun?" Horikita asked me.

"Yeah, a little."

"I'm surprised that he doesn't seem to be carrying out some kind of reconnaissance. However, he *did* refuse to cooperate with Class B. He doesn't appear interested in any sort of strategy." Horikita shot me a look that seemed to say, *I understand,* before continuing. "Or so I would have thought if you hadn't warned me. Surely the other students must think they're safe, though."

She glanced at the students, who were throwing themselves into practice.

"What you mentioned earlier, about Ryuuen-kun already having a strategy? I suppose this means that his plans are already in place. Reconnaissance isn't necessary for him." Horikita no longer appeared optimistic. On the contrary, she now looked clearly bewildered. "Anyone would want information on the other classes. They should want to know who is physically gifted, who'll participate in which

contests, and so on. But him…"

That in itself proved that Ryuuen already had a secret strategy.

"The important thing is not to be satisfied just with knowing that Ryuuen has a plan," I explained.

"What do you mean?"

"Normally, when someone has a secret plan in place, they do whatever it takes to ensure that their enemies don't figure it out. However, Ryuuen's not even trying to hide the fact that he's up to something. He's making it obvious by not bothering to do any reconnaissance," I said.

"It's almost like he's showing off. You know, I can't help but wonder where your powers of observation came from. But, since you've forbidden me from asking questions, I suppose I must be quiet."

What a disagreeable and Horikita-esque way of putting it. Of course, no matter how much she poked and prodded, I wouldn't budge.

"Suzune. You have a minute?" asked Sudou, startling Horikita with his late arrival. Sudou interrupting her train of thought clearly irritated her. Something else seemed to be bothering her, too.

"I've told you numerous times. Please do not call me by my first name."

"Aw, what do you mean? Does it really bother you that much?"

"Yes. I don't want someone I'm not close to using my first name," said Horikita. As always, she went right for the heart, sparing none of Sudou's feelings. "If you continue to call me 'Suzune' after this warning, I'll have to take more direct action to make you stop."

A terrifying proposition, truly. Sudou changed the topic.

"In that case, if I get the best results out of anyone in Class D during the festival, will you let me call you by your first name?"

"Hard work is its own reward. Why should I agree to such an idiotic bet?" Horikita probably wasn't aware of Sudou's feelings for her.

"Well, it's just… Not too long ago, you saved me. That's why I want to do things properly, so we can… No, I think I'd like to be friends with you, first. This is the first step," said Sudou.

"I can't understand why you'd go out of your way to request something like that. But fine. If you produce the best results, I will allow you to use my first name. However, I won't be satisfied if you're just the best in our class. Show me that you can be the best out of everyone in our grade," said Horikita.

She'd given Sudou an incredibly high hurdle to clear. But Sudou showed no sign of balking. "All right! It's a deal, then. If I place first in

our grade level, I'll call you by your first name," he said happily.

"However, in the event that you don't get first place, I'll forever forbid you from saying my first name. Prepare yourself," said Horikita.

"Y-yeah."

4.1

We started testing everyone's aptitude in earnest. Although Hirata's policy didn't encourage forced participation, roughly 90 percent of the class took part in the various tests. Only a few, like Kouenji and the Professor, sat them out.

"Hah…ah…phew!" Sakura finished in last place, looking as though she was about to collapse, both hands on her knees.

"Good work, Sakura. You really gave it your all."

"A-Ayanokouji-kun. Ah…hah…" Sakura wheezed.

Sakura had always been rather unathletic, but recently, she'd worked hard to contribute to the class. Unfortunately, her lack of physical endurance was still a problem.

"Hey, hey! Let's go!"

Meanwhile Sudou, usually the least serious class member, worked harder than I'd ever seen. He needn't have worried. When he was in top form, Sudou was unbeatable. No student in our class could stand as his equal.

"Wow, just like we'd expect, Sudou-kun! You always end up taking first place in our class, no matter the event. That's amazing!" said Kushida. She jumped up and down in excitement as Sudou finished running the 100-meter relay race.

"Heh, guess so. Even so, I dunno what'll happen if *he* runs." Sudou glared at Kouenji, who showed no interest whatsoever.

"You know, that reminds me. I've never seen Kouenji seriously run before."

Back when Kouenji had faced off against Sudou in swimming class, he'd beaten Sudou's time. His skill was obvious, but he wasn't going to budge unless he wanted to.

"But, seriously, you're amazing. Really, Sudou-kun, you're definitely the sports festival leader," said Kushida.

"Leader? Me?" Sudou repeated the word, appearing to be a little taken aback.

"Yes." Hirata, who was recording everyone's scores, apparently agreed with Kushida. "After all, the sports festival really is an athlete's time to shine. Would you mind leading our class for this?"

"I ain't really suited to be a leader or anythin'…" Sudou looked over at Horikita for her opinion.

“You’re not the type of person to speak eloquently. As a communicator, Hirata-kun is certainly the superior choice,” she said. “However, based on your sprint earlier and your other athletic records, I can see Hirata-kun’s point. You shine when showered with attention. Besides, brute strength will be necessary to pull our class along. I wouldn’t object to you serving as leader in this.”

She didn’t encourage him, but she didn’t reject him, either. She’d acknowledged him.

“Okay! I’ll lead our class to victory,” said Sudou. Perhaps being so lovestruck was foolish, but he clearly wanted to live up to Horikita’s expectations.

“Don’t get overconfident and sloppy, because I’ll make you pay for that,” warned Horikita.

She walked away and returned to practicing. Sudou blushed, clenching his fists as he watched her go.

4.2

Sudou was serious about being a leader. The next day, he began coaching the other students, starting by teaching them how to win the tug-of-war. I watched from a slight distance away.

"You're just pointlessly strainin' yourself. There's no strength at all in your pull. At this rate, you wouldn't win, even if you could," said Sudou.

He grabbed the short length of rope tightly to give us a practical demonstration. Ike and Yamauchi faced off against him. The looks on their faces suggested that they expected to win, but when the match began, Sudou pulled with an overwhelming amount of strength. A disappointingly short time later, Ike and Yamauchi fell down and sat on the ground.

"See? You ain't putting any power into it at all."

"I don't get it. Hey, Sudou, is there some kinda trick or something?"

"Well, power's important, but also, don't just use your arms. Use your hips, too," said Sudou. His manner was rough, but he gave each and every student thorough guidance.

"Hey, Sudou-kun. Can you come look at this for us? We're not doing well with our carriage for the cavalry battle."

"Sure. Wait a sec. I'll be right there."

There were more than a few unathletic students, which meant that several people asked Sudou for help. I was honestly surprised that even girls asked him for his opinion.

"Well, he seems to be taking this rather seriously."

"It's the first time that people have relied on him. Leadership might actually suit him, don't you think?" asked Horikita. "As for me, though…well, I wouldn't mind praising him, but—"

Before she could finish the thought, we heard an angry voice.

"Look, I'm tellin' you that ain't it!" Sudou kicked at the dirt, sending it flying toward Ike and Yamauchi.

"Gah! Puh…yuck! Dude, c'mon. Stop!"

Horikita sighed.

Sudou's rashness was still a problem. A leader needed to be patient, like Hirata, who always employed gentle teaching methods. He was currently checking some girls' positions in the carriage formation,

to make sure that they were comfortable.

"Yeah, I think this formation is great. But don't you feel a little cramped?" Hirata asked them.

"Yeah. My shoulders hurt a little, I guess."

"Let's change the positioning a bit. If you just move a few centimeters, it'll feel different."

"Oh, wow, you're right! That feels much more comfortable. Thank you, Hirata-kun."

"Hey, can you help us out, too, Hirata?" another cavalry group asked.

"Why don't you help teach the girls, too?" I asked Horikita. She was one of our top athletes; she had a lot going for her as a teacher.

"I don't want to teach them. Besides, I don't think anyone wants me to teach them, either."

With that bold statement, she started warming up by herself.

"I'm already trying my hardest to produce results for myself. How can you be so laid-back? I suppose, if you're sure you can win, that's fine," added Horikita.

"Nope, I'm not confident."

"That sounds about right. You always get average scores. You're neither fast nor slow. Your results don't stand out at all."

"You know that?"

"I try hard to uncover my classmates' true abilities." She had observed me closely, even during physical education. "I'll ask you this just once, but…are you holding back, like you did with your test scores?"

"Would I do something so pointless?"

"The odds of that are about fifty-fifty to me. So, do you?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint, but what you see is what you get."

"So, you're neither good nor bad. That means I shouldn't expect great results, hmm?"

"Yep, that's right."

"Then you should practice more, starting now."

"If I could improve in such a short time span, this wouldn't be a problem. Unlike studying, trying to do this all at the last minute the night before is kind of pointless." Physical ability only improved through repeated conditioning.

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to focus on events where you *can* improve quickly, though? For example, just learning how to grip a rope or form a carriage will increase our chances of victory."

“Maybe.”

I’d tried to slack off and cut class, but Horikita had firmly boxed me in. Well, there wasn’t any getting around it. I needed to practice for the recommended-participant events I’d somehow gotten roped into.

“Hey,” Horikita called out to me again as I walked away.

“Hmm?”

“Every class’s physical abilities will determine who wins and who loses. Right?”

“This is a sports festival. Physical abilities are key.”

“Yes. Still, that kind of thinking is limited. If I focus on my own performance, I’m confident that I can produce good results, but something’s been troubling me for a while. I might not be able to reach Class A just by improving my own skills,” said Horikita. It was an uncharacteristically timid remark, coming from her.

“Okay. Let me ask you this. What should we do in the sports festival to produce results? To reach Class A?”

In reply to my question, Horikita just gave me a confused look.

“Could it be that you’ll win if you enjoy it? This is the long-awaited sports festival, after all. Forgetting that this is a test and having fun is an option,” I said, as if trying to change the topic.

“You promised me that you’d cooperate, didn’t you? You said you’d help me reach Class A,” said Horikita.

“That’s what I’m doing, isn’t it?” I spread out my hands, showing that I’d nothing to hide. “I’ll participate in the festival. That’s cooperating.”

“Are you serious?”

“You said so yourself, didn’t you? Physical ability will determine victory or defeat.”

“But there are other aspects to the competition besides physical ability, too,” she said.

“Okay. So, on the day of the festival, should I give the Class B and C students stomachaches and make them bow out? If I do that, we’ll have a total victory. We’ll win by an overwhelming margin,” I said.

“Stop joking.”

“Look. It sounds like you’re saying that a high level of physical ability won’t be enough,” I said.

“So, you agree that something else is required?” she asked.

“You’ll learn the answer to that soon enough,” I replied.

Somebody was walking toward us. “Horikita-san, you’re up next for three-legged race practice.”

“Okay.”

Horikita left. Apparently, she was partnering with Onodera, a girl from the swimming club who was supposedly a great sprinter. I wondered how Horikita would handle it.

The five pairs of girls lined up in formation, then launched into the race. Horikita and Onodera weren’t slow, but they weren’t fast, either. They came in third. The worst team was Sakura and Inogashira, a most unathletic pair. They were slow as molasses.

Dissatisfied, Horikita and Onodera decided to practice the three-legged race again. That time went no better than the first.

“Those two’re kinda slow, huh?” mused Sudou.

“Yeah.”

Finishing their second run, the pair immediately untied the cord and faced each other. “Hey, Horikita-san, can’t you try to keep pace with me better?” Onodera sounded slightly annoyed.

“It’s certainly true that we aren’t moving in sync, but that’s not my fault. You’re too slow.”

“What?”

“Shouldn’t you strive to match the faster partner? Deliberately slowing my pace to suit yours makes no sense,” said Horikita.

It seemed that my worst fears were being realized. Trying to keep pace with the speedy Horikita was no easy feat.

“Okay. How about we give it a try, Ayanokouji-kun?” asked Hirata.

“Roger.” I didn’t have time to waste on Horikita, who was fighting with her partner. The three-legged race was a first for me, too.

“To begin with, let’s just focus on running. Then we can try and fix whatever goes wrong. Okay?”

I nodded and tied our legs together per Hirata’s instructions. It was too tight for my liking, and made me feel shackled. Honestly, it was a little embarrassing to be that close to somebody. Particularly Hirata, the darling of all the Class D girls.

“Okay then. Let’s take our first step,” said Hirata.

I nodded, and waited for Hirata to move his leg so I could match him. Keeping up with his rhythm, I stepped with my outer leg.

“This is really uncomfortable.”

“It is, isn’t it? But, as you run, try matching your breathing to our movements. Okay? I’m going to start running.”

Hirata picked up his pace slightly, and I copied him. Really, my run was only at about power-walking speed.

“Yeah, that’s it. That’s it! You’ve got it!”

Being complimented really did make things easier. As I got used to three-legged running, I realized that it was surprisingly simple. If both partners understood each other and maintained a similar pace, everything got smoother.

Hirata and I ran a small lap, came back, and untied the cord. Loud, high-pitched cheers could be heard from the girls. “So fast! Just like we’d expect from you, Hirata-kun!”

“It’s really, really easy with Ayanokouji-kun as my partner. Let’s all practice and do our best during the festival, okay?”

Yeah, he really was supportive. He’d just finished his own practice, and now he was heading off to give other students advice again. Just another day in the life of Hirata, a truly superior man.

4.3

It was mid-September, and the sports festival was less than two weeks away. Sudou remained steadfast and practiced tirelessly. Tempering his spirit day in and day out with basketball had made him tenacious. Some students among us were holding back and cutting corners, but Sudou always gave everything he had.

Of course, Hirata hadn't forgotten about our relationship with Class A. He periodically held meetings with Katsuragi during which they discussed how best to compete. Class D, normally just an inch away from disaster, was doing almost too well.

Looking at the big picture, I saw two remaining issues at hand.

First, Horikita Suzune. She could become an invaluable asset to the class, but she wasn't quite there yet. No matter how many times Horikita changed partners, they always ended up fighting and dissolving the partnership. Eventually, Horikita decided to compete paired with the girl who best matched her speed, but even that had fallen apart. Now she just spent her time silently alone.

"Do you have a minute?" I asked.

"What?" Perhaps because of stress, she seemed even pricklier than usual.

"I think it'd do you some good to compromise a little more," I said. I'd watched her practice, but had seen no sign of improvement. Horikita's overly forceful nature was getting in the way.

"Many people have told me that," she said, rubbing her forehead. "I won't compromise, because I'm trying to get the best time. Isn't that a good thing?"

"So, you have no intention of yielding?"

"That's right. I don't intend to accommodate someone else's slowness."

"But, because of that, no one wants to practice with you."

"If I'm expected to yield, my partner must put in the effort first. I can't work with someone who refuses to even try to improve," she replied.

"Stick your foot out."

"What are you getting at?"

"Partner with me for the three-legged race."

"Why should I?"

“There’s a mixed-gender three-legged race. Can’t we determine how compatible we are as partners?”

“So, you think you can keep pace with me? You’ll only drag me down.”

“According to your theory, my speed isn’t the issue, only my effort.”

“Fine. I’ll tie us together.”

Horikita crouched and tied the cord around our legs, as if telling me not to touch her. Everyone nearby was focused on practicing, and no one paid attention to us. Even Sudou, who’d probably get angry if he saw this, was too busy with other people.

“Well then, let’s go!”

At the beginning, I mirrored Horikita. However, as we picked up speed, I started going at my own pace.

“H-hey!”

Despite Horikita’s panic, I mercilessly went faster. She did everything she could to keep up with me, but her stamina and strength couldn’t match mine.

“You said that keeping up with your partner isn’t difficult, right?” I asked.

“That’s… I know!”

She was obstinate. I decided to shift gears. In the three-legged race, speed alone wasn’t enough. The important thing was to find a tempo that suited both partners, then find your best stride.

“Tch!”

Eventually, Horikita had to admit defeat. I grabbed her as she stumbled, then came to a stop. She breathed raggedly.

“This wasn’t about fast or slow. Your practices went wrong because you didn’t look at your partner,” I told her. Without saying another word, I untied the cord around our legs. “The important thing is to work with your partner. How about letting them take the lead?”

“I…”

“Think about it.”

Horikita’s athleticism meant that she needed to discern her partner’s ability level and then work with it.

I didn’t know whether she would learn and mature. That was up to her.

Kushida Kikyou was the second problem. She was something of a supporting character—working backstage, but never taking the spotlight. Although Hirata and Karuizawa often outshone Kushida, most

of our classmates liked her, which gave her a level of influence even those other two didn't have. In addition to Kushida's exceptional communication skills, she was both academically and physically gifted, and had been blessed with an incredible figure. In a sense, her assignment to Class D in the first place was quite the mystery.

However, I knew about the darkness within her. Not too long after starting school, I caught her angrily ranting to herself on a secluded rooftop. And, although I didn't yet know why, it was a fact that Kushida hated Horikita.

But both Horikita and Kushida were vital to Class D's improvement. Therefore, the only way to resolve the issue was to have them confront one another.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Ishizaki Daichi
CLASS:	First Year, Class C
STUDENT ID:	S01T004656
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	None
DATE OF BIRTH:	April 14th

EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	E
INTELLIGENCE:	E
DECISION MAKING:	E
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	C+
COOPERATIVENESS:	C+

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

Although his athletic abilities are slightly above average, we understand that he was infamous during junior high for being a bad student. However, at our institution, it is necessary to encourage maturity and growth, even with the least-promising students.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

Although he has a rather rough exterior, he's improving with the help of his classmates.

Chapter 5:
There's a Reason for Their Relationship

Really, all the spying served little purpose. The key to victory ultimately lay, not in the opponent's strength, but in the composition of the group-event teams. If you didn't know the names listed in their participation table, you couldn't attack other classes strategically.

Of course, the other classes wouldn't just share that information. If we managed to acquire a participation table, our odds would improve dramatically.

There was one exception, and it was the bomb waiting to go off inside Class D.

Two weeks before the sports festival, I made my move immediately after school ended for the day. I called to Horikita, who was gathering her things next to me.

"Hang out with me today."

"And if I say I don't want to?"

"You can say whatever you like, but then it won't be my fault if Class D gets in trouble."

"Okay. Fine. What do you want?"

"You'll understand better if you come with me." Saying that, I walked away from Horikita and called out to yet another target. "Kushida, do you have a minute?"

Kushida was happily chatting with some other girls from our class. "Hmm? What is it, Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked. She glanced at Horikita, who seemed slightly uncomfortable.

"Do you have any plans for tomorrow?" I asked. Saturday would be a day off for Kushida.

"I don't really have any right now. I was just thinking of cleaning my room," Kushida said.

"If it's okay with you, would you mind giving me some time in the morning?" I cut right to the chase. If Kushida looked as though she disliked the idea, I wouldn't press her.

"Okay," said Kushida. She smiled, as if to dispel my anxieties. "You know, it's really unusual for you to invite me out, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Yeah, I suppose it is. By the way, Horikita will be coming, too."

"Wait a second," Horikita started. I motioned to her to stay quiet.

“Okay. I don’t mind, but…why in the morning?” asked Kushida.

“I was just thinking that I wanted to spy on the enemy again, but with you along—you know, as someone who knows a lot about other classes. Horikita asked me to help her, but there are lots of things I don’t know.”

I was being mostly honest, though the part about Horikita was completely made up. I knew Kushida wouldn’t come unless I told her the truth about what I wanted. Also, I needed her to understand her role.

Kushida nodded. “Yes, I suppose I might be the right person for the job. Okay. What time were you thinking? The earlier the better, right?”

“Yeah. I was thinking sometime like ten o’clock. Would that be okay?”

“Completely okay. We’ll meet in the dorm lobby tomorrow morning, then?”

“Sure. Thanks,” I answered.

As she left, Kushida waved at some girls waiting in the hallway, and they walked together toward the dorms. As I started to head back myself, Horikita grabbed me.

“What are you planning?”

“Doing a little reconnaissance isn’t a bad thing, wouldn’t you agree?” I replied.

“I don’t understand the reason for inviting me. If all you’re doing is spying, then you and Kushida should be enough.”

“Do you really think that?”

“I wouldn’t say something like that as a joke.”

“We’re too visible here. Let’s talk while we walk.”

I took the lead, leaving Horikita behind, and eventually, she followed.

“You remember what happened to your team on the cruise ship?”

“Of course. Everyone discovered our VIP’s identity. A humiliating outcome,” said Horikita.

“That’s right. It shouldn’t have happened. There is most definitely a reason why it did,” I replied.

“Yes, but I don’t know why. No matter how hard I try, I just can’t find the answer. I assume Ryuuen-kun was involved somehow,” mused Horikita. It sounded as though she’d come to a dead end. Doubts and incomplete theories, unending and irritating, were probably flooding her mind.

“Well, I don’t have proof, but I have a theory.”

Horikita looked at me as though she were genuinely shocked. “Are you saying you’ve figured out Ryuuen-kun’s strategy?”

“Yeah. To be more accurate, it’s not just Ryuuen. One other person was significantly involved in the outcome on the cruise ship,” I told her.

We reached the main entrance and retrieved our shoes from the rack. Walking outside, we continued our conversation.

“If you think about it, there was no way the VIP’s identity could have been discovered. You and Hirata never told anyone else that Kushida was the VIP. Correct?”

“Of course.”

“But what about Kushida herself? What if she intentionally exposed her identity?”

“That’s impossible, right? She’d have nothing to gain from that at all,” answered Horikita.

“You can’t say that for certain. For example, what about making a deal under the table, in which she tells another party that she’s the VIP in exchange for private points?”

“Even if that’s possible, it would hurt Class D. And it would be very risky,” replied Horikita.

“That risk depends on the timing, though. There are many ways to establish trust,” I answered.

“So, you’re saying that Kushida would betray her allies to gain a few measly points?”

“Maybe, maybe not. Only Kushida knows.”

That was why I’d invited Kushida. To learn the truth.

“So, you want Kushida and me to come with you to…uncover the truth?” Horikita finally seemed to suspect that Kushida might have turned traitor.

“You and Kushida seem to have some kind of connection. A shared fate, maybe.”

Horikita awkwardly averted her eyes. “Kushida-san and I have no bond whatsoever,” she replied.

“In that case, can you say with 100 percent confidence that she wouldn’t betray the class and you?”

“That’s…”

“If you’re uncertain, you should confirm it. If we don’t make sure, it’ll all be over, won’t it? No matter what the exam, our class has no chance of winning if there’s a traitor in our midst,” I said.

Before we knew it, we were at the dormitory. We entered the first-floor elevator and hit the buttons for our floors.

“You’re free to choose whether or not you come tomorrow, but if you want to lead the class, think about it.”

I got off on the fourth floor, leaving Horikita with those parting words.

5.1

Saturday morning came, and I was in my room, having a fun time talking about stupid stuff with three other people. Of course, I mostly just listened to the conversation, only occasionally interjecting to show that I was following along. Because the basketball club couldn't use the gymnasium, Sudou was getting a little R&R today. Me aside, the three idiots were having a good time. They'd all brought along cups of noodles, and proceeded to pour hot water in the cups and wait for three minutes.

"Hey, Ayanokouji. What flavor did you get?" Sudou asked.

"Extra-spicy tom yum goong. I didn't really know what it was like, so I thought I'd try it."

"Man, that sounds good. Trade with me, please? I'll give you my salty ramen." He extended his hand toward me, offering me his noodle cup. It had an illustration of a salted squid on it.

"No thanks." Why did he buy such unappetizing ramen?

"Hey, Ken. Do you plan on telling Horikita?"

"Huh? The hell is this about?"

"Nothin'. Just curious, dude. That's all. Right, Haruki?"

"Y-yeah." Yamauchi gave a forced smile. He'd suffered an honorable defeat after confessing his love for Sakura over the summer.

"That depends on how the festival goes. If I win, then maybe I can make a move."

"Oh. You mean how you wanted to use her first name, right?"

Sudou, determined to take first place across every grade level at any cost, flexed his biceps. "I mean, there ain't none of the first years better than me at sports," he said.

"Your only real competition's Kouenji, and he probably won't take this seriously."

I decided to cut in and ask about something that had been on my mind. "Hey, there's some student in Class A named Sakayanagi, right? The disabled girl. Remember her?"

"Oh, that beautiful girl? Yeah, dude, of course I remember her." Ike smiled as he rubbed his nose.

"Have you heard rumors about her?"

"Rumors? Like guys she's been with? Dunno. It's like…how do I say this? She doesn't really put it out there, you know? I don't think

there's much going on that way," said Ike.

Yamauchi agreed. "From what I've heard, people say that she's the class leader. She's really, like, *mature*, isn't she?"

Well, it didn't look as though I would get any valuable information about Sakayanagi from those two. My phone buzzed, indicating that I'd received a message. As I checked it, I could feel Ike and Yamauchi's eyes upon me. They seemed mistrustful.

"You know, dude, you've been getting lots of messages lately. Haven't you?" asked Ike.

"Huh? Nah, not really. I mean, isn't this normal?" I answered nonchalantly.

The truth of the matter was that I actually *had* gotten more messages lately, so the suspicious glint in their eyes only became more pronounced.

"You don't have a girlfriend, do you?" Yamauchi pressed harder.

"Absolutely not, so relax. Besides, there's no way *I* could get a girlfriend before you guys. Right?"

"I guess that's true," Yamauchi replied.

"Look, nobody cares about Ayanokouji being unpopular. Let's talk about *my* future with Suzune," said Sudou.

"That reminds me. You're partnering with Horikita in the mixed boy-and-girl three-legged race, right, Ken?"

"Yeah. And, when we win, we'll start getting closer. *Intimately* closer."

Just as Sudou launched into a discussion I really couldn't have cared less about, my phone buzzed yet again. This time, it was an alarm.

"Sorry, guys. I've got plans," I said.

"Wait, what? We were just getting to the good stuff. Well, fine. I got Kanji and Haruki here to listen to every single detail," said Sudou.

I'd been hinting for them to get out of my room…but oh well. Rather than press the issue, I decided to leave the three idiots where they were, and go on my way.

5.2

It was just before ten in the morning, the time I'd promised to meet Kushida. She was already in the lobby.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun," said Kushida warmly.

"G-good morning, Kushida." Summer was almost over, so I'd only be able to see Kushida in her summer clothes for a little while longer. My heart beat faster at the sight. "Sorry for making such a strange request yesterday."

"Oh, no, it's okay. Really. I didn't have anything planned today. Besides, this feels kind of nostalgic," she answered.

"Nostalgic?"

"Well, remember how, during the first semester exams, you asked a senior student for the previous test questions? I just thought this felt kind of similar, is all," she answered.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah."

I hadn't considered that memory anything special, but Kushida seemed pleased by the thought. Honestly, I felt as though this would've been easier if I'd brought Karuizawa or Sakura along, but if you want a job done right, find the right person to do it. Kushida was absolutely the best person for the job.

More importantly, there was Horikita to deal with. It was almost ten o'clock, and there still wasn't any sign of her. Was she backing down from having to meet with Kushida? Just as I wondered that, though, Horikita showed up.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting."

"Good morning, Horikita-san."

Kushida welcomed Horikita with an unwavering smile. However, Horikita was apparently in a bad mood. She seemed to be trying to hide that fact, but it was plain to see. Kushida had to have noticed, but she acted exactly the same way as she always did.

The three of us left the dormitory and headed toward the athletic grounds. By ten, the grounds were already filled with students.

"Wow, they're really going at it!"

Out on the grounds, the *thock* sound of someone kicking a ball echoed through the air. The ball curved toward the goalpost. It moved in a beautiful arc, but was perhaps a bit easy to see coming. The goalie,

showing sharp reflexes, repelled it with a punch. Hirata was among those playing. Since the teams consisted of a mixture of students from first year through third year, I didn't know everyone.

"I feel kind of like a secret agent, spying on clubs to gain information about other classes. It's so exciting, my heart is pounding!" said Kushida.

"It's not that big a deal. The information we can get here doesn't amount to much," I said.

"But Horikita-san doesn't think that. Right?"

"Information is invaluable. We don't know what might be the key to our victory," said Horikita.

"That's true. But it was really kind of you to do this for Horikita-san's sake, Ayanokouji-kun," said Kushida.

"Well, I didn't exactly have a choice. She would've given me grief if I hadn't," I replied.

"I'm impressed that you have the nerve to say that when I'm standing right here," said Horikita.

I ignored her terrifying comment and focused my attention on the sports grounds. It looked as though the players were setting up a corner kick. The soccer teams casually walked onto the field and got into position before resuming. We could feel that the game was about to start.

As Kushida grinned, I felt uncomfortable about the three of us hanging out together like this. Surprisingly enough, the highly agreeable Kushida decided to drop the pretense first.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you were the one who decided to invite me out today, weren't you?"

"Why do you think that?"

"Well, I can't imagine that Horikita-san would invite me," replied Kushida. Still smiling, she briefly looked over at Horikita, then returned her gaze to me.

"Why can't you imagine that Horikita would invite you?" I asked.

"Ha ha! You know, you're kind of an awful person, Ayanokouji-kun. You understand that things aren't good between Horikita-san and me, don't you?" Kushida spoke frankly. Horikita listened quietly, not attempting to deny anything.

"To be completely honest, it's not that I don't understand it. Rather, it's like I half believe it, and half don't."

The player in the corner kicked the ball, sending it toward a teammate waiting near the goalpost. Hirata skillfully caught it. Seeing

that he couldn't score a goal if he tried for a shot from right there, he passed the ball to a teammate, a Class B student we already knew.

The ball sailed into the goal in a brilliant arc.

"So, Shibata's in the soccer club."

"Yeah. Hirata-kun says that Shibata-kun is better than he is. It seems like they're close," answered Kushida. As expected, she was especially well-informed. As the game started back up, Shibata got the ball and quickly wove through the opposing team.

"He's fast." He seemed even faster than Hirata, in terms of speed. Hirata hadn't been lying.

"Wow, they're really going at it! They're all fired up! This is the best!" A tall guy in a soccer uniform walked past us.

"Good morning, Nagumo-senpai!" said Kushida.

Apparently, she knew him. Horikita, meanwhile, had a small, nearly imperceptible reaction. Nagumo was a candidate to become the next student council president, his abilities on par with her older brother's.

"Oh? Right, you're Kikyou-chan. I see you're on a date. Nice," said Nagumo.

"Ha ha! No, it's not like that. I was just curious, so I came here to watch," she replied.

"Great. Enjoy. We don't really hold back here, so I think this is a good way to measure our players' strengths," said Nagumo.

He winked at Kushida and headed down to meet up with the others. Apparently, he'd guessed what we were doing. The soccer club seemed excited when Nagumo joined them.

"Is it okay for someone to be on the student council *and* in a club?" I asked.

"It looks like he's not really in the club anymore," Kushida replied. "But even though he quit, he's still the best player. He shows up to practice from time to time, to help guide the rest of the team."

"So, you all set, Nagumo?" asked one of the students.

"Yeah, dude. I overslept, but after running some laps, I'm all warmed up," Nagumo replied.

He swapped places with another student, and the game resumed. Both the ball and other players moved toward Nagumo immediately. He seemed like a reliable teammate and a dangerous opponent.

Hirata challenged Nagumo and tried to steal the ball. His movements were as sharp as before, but Nagumo handled him with ease. Shibata charged at Nagumo, too, but Nagumo feinted several

times before slipping past. I'd thought that both Hirata and Shibata were skilled, but Nagumo was in a different league.

After running past yet another person, Nagumo took a powerful shot from midfield. The ball curved past the goalie, and Nagumo scored.

"So, the title of student council president isn't just for show, huh?"

"He's just really athletic, that's all." Horikita did not intend to acknowledge Nagumo's obvious skill.

As I spoke to Horikita, I snuck a glance at Kushida. She was all smiles; not even a hint of her dark side could be seen.

"When you stare at me like that, it's embarrassing," said Kushida. Her eyes met mine, and she laughed, as though she guessed what I was thinking.

"If I promise not to ask more questions, would you please tell me one thing?" I asked. Despite Horikita's presence, I decided to go for it. "Why don't you and Horikita like each other?"

"Asking me to tell you something by saying you won't ask anything else is unfair," said Kushida. Maybe my request was psychological manipulation, but Kushida understood both my tactic and my question. "If I tell you, that's it, right?"

"Yeah. I promise."

"It's me," she replied, still watching the game.

I hadn't expected that. So, even though she was at fault for their bad relationship, she still hated Horikita? That was kind of a contradiction. When someone hated someone else, they'd normally claim the other person was wholly at fault.

I was relatively good at observing people, but couldn't quite read Kushida. I was starting to think that I understood Horikita a little less, too. She had known that Kushida hated her from the very beginning, but she never talked to me about it. However, based on Kushida's answer, Horikita might know the cause of the girl's hatred.

Of course, if I asked, Horikita probably wouldn't tell me. *Why is that?* I wondered. Was there something that they each didn't want the other to know?

"I get the feeling that just thinking about this is a waste of time," I huffed.

"Yeah. I suppose so. Our priority right now is to spy and gather information anyway, right?" asked Kushida.

"I guess." I shrugged.

"The player handling the ball right now is Sonoda-kun from Class C. He's quite fast, isn't he?" mused Kushida.

All the students in the soccer club were nimble. The only ones from our class who could probably hold their own were Sudou and Hirata, but even they'd be hard-pressed to keep up.

"But Horikita-san is thinking about our class as a whole. That makes me happy," said Kushida.

"I aim to do whatever is necessary to reach Class C, so I've no other choice," replied Horikita.

After a while, the soccer players took a break. Nagumo called to Hirata. Then, perhaps because he realized we'd been watching, Hirata approached us.

"Good morning. It's unusual to see you here," he said.

Shibata, who'd seen us all from a distance, came running over as well. That created a rather unusual little five-person group.

"Good morning, Kikyou-chan. Oh, and…Ayanokouji and Horikita-chan, right? Ayanokouji, are you on a date with these two beautiful girls?" asked Shibata.

"No, it's not like that."

Shibata and I were acquainted, but I hadn't known that he remembered my name. That made me kind of happy, though I kept from grinning.

"So, what's up? This is an odd gathering," Hirata said.

I boldly decided to tell him the truth. “We’re spying. We’ve come to identify students from other classes whom we think we should watch out for.”

“Ah. So, that means you’ve noticed Shibata Man already, huh?”

Shibata had made no attempt to hide his true athletic abilities. I wondered if that was because he was in Class B, under Ichinose’s leadership, or just because that was his personality.

“Shibata-kun really is fast, just like the rumors say,” replied Kushida. “Ayanokouji-kun and I were shocked.”

At being complimented by a cute girl, Shibata bashfully rubbed his nose with his index finger.

“We need to be especially wary of Shibata-kun. He’s the fastest in Class B. Personally, I’d rather not compete against him,” said Hirata.

“Don’t sell yourself short, Yousuke. You’re really fast, too. How about you, Ayanokouji?” Shibata asked.

“I’m a member of the go-home-and-do-nothing club,” I replied.

Shibata crossed his arms and laughed.

We left soon afterward, on the pretext of checking out other club activities; that was just a cover. There was something else I wanted to know, and I had set the stage for it. How it would play out…well, that was up to the two girls.

“You bore me, Kushida-san,” said Horikita.

“Wow, that’s pretty harsh,” Kushida replied.

“But I have to ask you something,” Horikita continued.

“Between you and Ayanokouji-kun, I’m getting a lot of questions. Okay, what is it?”

“During the cruise ship exam, did you tell Ryuuen-kun or Katsuragi-kun that you were the VIP?”

I’d expected Horikita to ask in a straightforward way, but she really cut straight to the heart of the matter. Kushida looked shocked, but Horikita kept talking.

“It’s fine if you don’t answer. It’s meaningless to dig up the past. That’s why there’s only one question I find important. Can I trust you to be our class’s ally from this point on?” asked Horikita.

“Of course. I want to get to Class A, alongside everyone from Class D. That’s what I’ve said from the very beginning,” said Kushida. “I don’t know why you’d ask something like that, but I want you to trust me.”

Though Kushida smiled at Horikita, she looked very serious.

“Well then, I’m heading back. I’ll leave the rest of the reconnaissance to you two,” I said.

“Huh? What are you saying, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“Horikita came up with this strategy in the first place. If you have Kushida’s extensive network and connections at your disposal, you should be fine. Right?” I asked.

With that, I left.

5.3

With everyone working hard, the days passed quickly. Finally, only one week was left until the sports festival. We needed to decide who would participate in each competition and submit our participation table before the day finished. While Hirata stood at the podium, Kushida faced the blackboard with chalk in hand to record the preparations.

"Without further ado, let's decide on the entries," said Hirata.

To choose the order for our winning strategy, Hirata consulted his notes, which contained aggregate results of our entire class's daily records. We had written down the order, everyone's roles, and the competitions they'd enter. Not a single student objected to Hirata's results, which were based on hard data and clear testing of people's abilities. Everything proceeded without a hitch.

"Okay. For the final event, the 1200-meter relay, Sudou will be our anchor."

"That seems fair."

I was impressed by how Hirata managed to respect everybody's individual wishes while also taking everyone's abilities into account. In the relay, the final event, the star players would be the fastest students, like Horikita. No one could have come up with a more ideal lineup.

However, Horikita—who sat next to me—continued to stare at the blackboard with an unconvinced expression. Immediately after the discussion ended, she stood up. While I wondered where this was going, she went right to Sudou.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I want to talk to you about something. Can you come with me?" Horikita replied.

"S-sure." Sudou hurriedly stood straight up at Horikita's command.

"Oh, Hirata-kun. Can I also have a moment of your time?"

Sudou, whose heart must have been pounding for a moment, immediately looked disappointed.

"I want to discuss the participation table we decided on earlier. I'd like you to give me the anchor position in the 1200-meter relay at the end of the festival," said Horikita.

Sudou looked confused. "But, well…the anchor position is

normally for the fastest person, right? Do ya feel uneasy having me as the anchor?"

"No, that's not it. I know your abilities from seeing you practice," said Horikita.

"Okay. So, I can handle it, right? I mean, if the anchor is the fifth runner, then—"

"I have my reasons. You're good with the starting dash, right, Sudou-kun? I think that having you breeze past our opponents as the first runner is a viable strategy. Starting with the second runner, we'll allow everyone to take the lane they like on a first-come-first-served basis. In the event that we're overtaken, the rules state that, from the second runner onward, we're allowed to use the outer lanes to overtake other runners," Horikita explained.

"But…" Sudou didn't appear convinced.

It was certainly true that, if Sudou did well at the starting dash, the rest of our relay team from the second runner onward would have an easier time. However, if we used up Sudou's turn right at the start of the relay, our later runners would be under pressure if the competition closed the gap. On the other hand, Sudou could provide a burst of power in the relay's final leg as the anchor. If there were targets for him to chase, he'd be all the more spurred on to win.

"It's just, y'know, the anchor position goes to the fastest team member."

"This school is a meritocracy. Let's not make choices based on assumptions or preconceived notions. The other classes will be coming up with various strategies as well," Horikita reasoned.

I understood her logic, but I felt as though she was pushing a bit too hard. It didn't make much difference who the anchor was; both she and Sudou were sure to perform well. That meant there was another reason Horikita wanted to be anchor.

"I'll definitely produce better results than I've gotten in practice," Horikita asserted.

"I ain't convinced. This ain't like you, Horikita," said Sudou.

"Excuse me. Is it okay for me to chime in?" Kushida hesitantly entered the conversation. "Uh, I'm sorry. I just think maybe there's some other reason Horikita-san wants to be anchor."

"That's—"

"In that case, Horikita, would you mind telling us why? If you have a request, Sudou and I will take that very seriously. But if we're changing the order that everyone decided as a class, I need more

information," said Hirata.

"I agree with Hirata. We need a reason," said Sudou.

Horikita wore a complicated expression. "It's because I think my brother…is an anchor," she said quietly.

"Your brother? The student council president?"

"Yes. That's my brother."

Everyone knew the student council president, but not everyone had made the connection that he and Horikita were related. Theirs was by no means an uncommon family name. They also didn't really look that much alike. Everybody seemed surprised by Horikita's statement.

"So, you want to be an anchor with your brother? Is that it?" Kushida didn't seem as though she fully understood. I decided to cut in and give Horikita a little help.

"Some stuff happened. I guess Horikita and her brother aren't really on speaking terms. She probably wants this opportunity to patch things up with him," I offered.

It wasn't exactly the truth, but it wasn't a lie, either. Horikita glared at me for an instant, since I had eavesdropped on her conversation, but immediately looked back to Sudou and the others.

"I was wondering what the matter was. So, that's it, huh? Well, to be honest, I do still want the anchor position. But if that's the way you feel, then I don't mind handin' it over to you," said Sudou.

"I think it's fine, too. If Sudou-kun is satisfied, then everyone else will be too, right?" Kushida added.

"Right. Sounds good. Well, I'll submit our list after I swap Horikita-san and Sudou-kun's places. Is that okay?" asked Hirata.

"Thank you," said Horikita quietly.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Shibata Sou
CLASS:	First Year, Class B
STUDENT ID:	S01T004666
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	Soccer Club
DATE OF BIRTH:	November 11th

EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	C
INTELLIGENCE:	D
DECISION MAKING:	B
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	B+
COOPERATIVENESS:	B–

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

He was actively involved in soccer club during elementary school and junior high, and is an excellent student. Because of his considerate nature, his classmates and teachers trust him implicitly, and he has a great reputation. We absolutely want to help him mature.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

He's like a male version of Ichinose-san. Everyone likes him. He's a student with a very promising future, since he's good at both sports and communication.

Chapter 6:
The Curtains Rise

At last, the day had come. The curtains were about to rise on the sports festival, and it looked to be a long day. The entire student body, all wearing their jerseys, marched together as one. Well, we called it a march, but most people just strolled along, taking the movement just seriously enough not to disrupt the order.

"All right, time to really show off for Kikyou-chan!" shouted Ike as he walked directly behind me.

How did he plan to show off when he was bad at sports? The guy was all bark and no bite.

Fujimaki, from the third-year Class A, gave a speech during the opening ceremony. Although there weren't many, a number of spectators watched from the school grounds' outskirts. They were probably adults who worked on campus. The school didn't seem to have put any strict restrictions in place regarding who could attend the festival. Occasionally, one of the spectators smiled or waved.

Meanwhile, the teachers themselves watched us without the vaguest hint of smiles. Medical personnel could also be seen setting up some kind of cottage. It could fit around twenty people and was equipped with an air conditioner and water cooler. The school's preparations were as meticulous as they had been on the deserted island. They provided tents for the Red Team and White Team; these faced each other on opposite sides of the track. The school didn't want the teams mingling with each other, except during competitions.

The first event of the festival was the 100-meter dash, and I saw that a camera had been installed and pointed toward the finish line. The line between victory and defeat could come down to a hair's breadth in competitions like these.

6.1

"What group are you in for the 100-meter dash, again?" Horikita asked.

"Seventh," I answered, looking over at the program table, which had the participation order and schedule.

"Hopefully no one exceptionally good turns up. I'll be cheering you on for the class's sake."

"I'll do my best not to come in last, then," I replied.

With that unambitious goal, I headed to the track with the rest of the first-year boys. The festival ordered events such as the 100-meter dash by grade level, starting with the first-year boys and ending with the third-year girls. Then there'd be a break, after which the order would switch. We'd resume competitions in the opposite direction, starting with third-year girls and ending with first-year boys.

The competition was about to start. Now we'd finally learn who would run from which class, and in what order. The first-year boys formed ten groups in total; mine was seventh. Each group contained eight people, two from each class. Sudou was in the first group.

All of Class D watched, holding their breath. This festival's outcome depended greatly upon Sudou. If we won this race, everyone on our team could use that momentum to get hyped. If Sudou did poorly, it would probably put a dent in our spirits.

"From my point of view, nobody here's really that big a deal. I see lots of fatties and twigs. Sudou's got first place covered!" shouted Ike.

I couldn't see any students of note from the other three classes in Sudou's group. Like Ike had said, Sudou's victory was probably assured.

"Then again, depending on how you look at it, this could be a big loss for us."

Something about seeing Sudou hunched and ready at the starting line inspired feelings of absolute confidence. Even if he did happen to take a spill in the middle of the race, he'd still be all right. He could do this.

As soon as the signal sounded, Sudou shot forward like a bullet. He quickly outran all the other boys, leaving them in the dust. He reached the goal with such an overwhelming lead that no one else came anywhere close. He won by a landslide.

While everyone watched, Sudou took first place, as anticipated.

Meanwhile, the Professor—the second Class D student in the first group—managed to come in last. We'd anticipated that, too.

The signal to start the next race came right away, without any time to bask in the afterglow. The signals came at about twenty-second intervals, which meant that it would take four minutes for all the first-year boys to finish running. This event would repeat for all the boys and girls in all three grade levels, which meant that the 100-meter dash should finish in about thirty minutes.

"Just as we'd expect from Sudou-kun." Hirata seemed genuinely impressed.

"Yeah. Feels like the other classes were pretty dumbstruck, too."

We, the seventh group, also had our roles to play. Hirata, who belonged to the soccer club and was a fast runner, was sure to place high. I'd take a spot at least one place after him, so there was really nothing to be anxious about. It was just a question of how to stand out while remaining inconspicuous.

There were several students from other classes to be wary of. I wondered which groups had athletic students like Kanzaki and Shibata, and which boasted students with a strong presence like Ryuuen or Katsuragi. The third group hurried to the starting line.

"Oh, Baldy's—I mean, Katsuragi's—in the first lane," said Ike, pointing at Katsuragi's head.

Sunlight shone on Katsuragi's scalp, lending it a brilliant sheen. Next to him, I saw another guy I knew: Kanzaki from Class B. So, Katsuragi and Kanzaki would be competing against each other, huh?

Kouenji was also supposed to be in the third group, but there was no sign of him in Lane 5, which he'd been assigned. No one from the school bothered to search for him. They just marked it as an absence and immediately started the race.

I thought that the third group would be a close match, but Kanzaki was fastest. Katsuragi was by no means slow, just outclassed. The race ended without much fuss. Kanzaki took first place and Katsuragi third. As the races continued, Hirata noticed something.

"Ayanokouji-kun. There," he said, gesturing at the temporary cottage that had been erected.

When I strained my eyes to look, I saw Kouenji inside, fussing with his hair.

"Apparently, he's not participating."

Kouenji had cooperated all the way up until the opening ceremonies, but in the end, it appeared that he planned to bow out of

the competitions. His absence weighed heavily on both our class and the Red Team. Class A had Sakayanagi, who also wouldn't participate in any events, but at least she had a valid reason.

If Classes B and C had no absentees, the Red Team would need to make up for their two missing members. That was quite the handicap.

The rest of the competition progressed smoothly, and soon it was time for the seventh group. I went and stood in Lane 4, with Hirata next to me in Lane 5. There was also Yahiko, from Class A, but the rest of the competitors were guys I wasn't familiar with.

This was the first sports festival of my life. I started off with a medium dash, neither fast nor slow. Hirata slowly but surely passed me and joined the top runners. I saw four people's backs in front of me, which meant that I was in fifth.

Because there wasn't a huge difference in speed between us, we all kind of clustered together. As we continued to run, our order didn't change. In the end, I finished in fifth place. Hirata narrowly took the top spot.

"Whew. Good job," he said, taking a deep breath.

"Sorry. I dragged us down," I replied.

"That's not true. Everyone was fast. It was a good race," said Hirata.

Despite my disappointing results, he didn't blame me at all. Instead, he gave me a smile.

We hurried off the track and headed over to the tent. The next group would be starting, and we were in the way. After the first-year boys finished running the 100-meter dash, they returned to their seats and focused on watching the girls with a predatory intensity. They cared about the race's outcome, of course, but they also just wanted to watch the girls run.

"Where's Sudou?" I asked. He should have returned to his seat by now.

"Who knows? Maybe the toilet? Dude, we've got more important things to look at. Check out those jiggling boobs, man, those *boobs*!" said the chipper Ike.

I immediately had a bad feeling about Sudou's absence. He should have been cheering Horikita on, so his disappearance was strange.

I looked over toward the cottage to see that my intuition was correct. Sudou was approaching Kouenji.

"This isn't good. I need to stop them," I said.

"Yeah," replied Hirata.

Hirata and I ran toward the cottage, where things were apparently already heating up. His hand balled tightly into a fist, Sudou confronted Kouenji. “Hey, you. What’s the big idea, sitting this out?! Don’t disregard the rest of us, jerk!”

Kouenji didn’t seem to notice that Sudou was even there. He just kept admiring his own reflection in the window, which only made Sudou angrier.

“Looks like you ain’t gonna understand unless I beat you up, Kouenji,” Sudou growled.

“No. You can’t do that, Sudou-kun. If the teachers find out—” Hirata tried to stop them, but Sudou wasn’t the kind of guy to be deterred.

“I don’t care. This is a class problem, right? It don’t even matter if I beat him up, long as this punk doesn’t go crying to the teachers,” said Sudou.

“You’re quite foul, aren’t you? I came here to enjoy some me time. Alone. As you can see, I’m feeling quite ill today. I decided to withdraw so that I wouldn’t be a burden,” said Kouenji.

“Don’t give me that bull crap! If this was just practice, that’d be one thing, but you’re skipping out on the actual event!”

I understood why Sudou was shouting. Kouenji looked to be in perfect health.

“No. Don’t, Sudou-kun!” Hirata panicked. But before he could intervene, Sudou threw a punch. He probably intended to knock sense into Kouenji, but Kouenji stopped the blow, catching the other boy’s fist in his palm.

A dull *slap* echoed through the cottage.

“Stop. You cannot hope to beat me.” Kouenji didn’t even look at Sudou as he spoke.

Sudou hadn’t held back with that blow. Now that the other boy had blocked it easily, he had to realize Kouenji’s real strength, but that only seemed to fire him up even more. “Bring it on. I’ll smash in your nose,” Sudou growled.

“Goodness. Both you and that girl seem to consider me unreliable,” replied Kouenji.

“‘That girl?’ Who?”

“That cold girl who’s so inflamed your passion. She’s been telling me over and over that she wants me to seriously participate in the sports festival.”

“Horikita?”

“In any case, leave now. I’m not feeling well,” said Kouenji, waving us away.

“You jerk!”

To prevent a second punch from flying, Hirata stepped between Sudou and Kouenji. “Let’s all just calm down a little. Kouenji-kun’s attitude is a problem, but if he says he’s not feeling well, then he has the right to rest. Besides, violence is bad, no matter the circumstances.”

“But he’s definitely lying! He said the same thing back on the island,” said Sudou.

“That is a baseless accusation. My proud carriage serves to disguise how poor my health is,” said Kouenji.

“So, you’re planning on skipping the rest of the competitions, too, huh?”

“If I recover, I will of course participate. *If* I recover,” replied Kouenji.

“The next competition is about to begin, Sudou-kun. As our leader, your absence impacts our morale,” said Hirata, switching tactics.

“Fine. I’ll head on back,” groused Sudou.

“Thank you,” said Hirata. He escorted Sudou from the cottage, and I followed a little way behind. We made it to the Red Team tent, where Sudou sat back down, clearly still irritated.

“Damn! Next time, I’m seriously going to punch that jerk,” he huffed.

His anger, rather than dissipating, only continued to swell. In keeping with the adage that “a wise man keeps away from danger,” people started giving him a wide berth.

Ike, however, was too engrossed in the girls’ race to notice Sudou’s frustration. Before I knew it, the girls’ 100-meter dash was nearly over. The final group had just entered the track.

“What are you doing, Ken? The girl you like is about to start, dude!” Ike cheerfully slapped Sudou on the back. Sudou grabbed his arm and forced Ike into a headlock.

“Gah! Dude, the hell?!”

“Stress relief,” said Sudou.

“Ouch, ouch, ouch! I give, I give!” shouted Ike.

It was a pitiful sight, but taking his anger out on Ike seemed to help Sudou. As Horikita’s race began, he calmed down a little. If that was all it took to heal him, then I’d let him heal.

As I watched Sudou, Sakura appeared next to me, completely out of breath.

“Ahh…ahh…! I-It hurts…”

She must’ve used up all her energy when she ran. She was breathing very deeply, as though she was in a lot of pain.

“W-were you watching me, Ayanokouji-kun?” she asked.

She looked up at me, her eyes sparkling behind her glasses. Unfortunately, Sakura’s race took place while I was chasing Sudou, so I hadn’t seen a thing. Of course, if I told her that, she’d probably be really sad.

“You did well,” I said.

My response was brief, but true. One fact that I could be absolutely certain of was that Sakura definitely gave everything she had.

“Th-thank you! This is the first time I didn’t come in dead last.” She beamed.

Whenever we'd practiced, Sakura was always the slowest out of everyone by far. It seemed that she'd finally beaten someone else—because of her own hard work, too, not an opponent's mistake.

"Just don't push yourself too hard. You might hurt yourself," I said.

"O-okay!" she replied with a smile.

Sakura stood beside me, still breathing heavily, and looked over at the next race. I focused on the other girls who would run against Horikita. In the third lane was Ibuki Mio, a Class C student. Horikita was in the same group as her most bitter rival. What a bizarre coincidence.

Horikita didn't even look at Ibuki, but Ibuki wore a furious expression, as though fire shot from her eyes. She was determined never to lose to Horikita, no matter what.

"Hey, I wonder if Ibuki-chan's good at sports?" the other boys speculated.

"Hell if I know. All I know is Horikita's gonna win, no doubt."

They didn't realize that Ibuki was highly athletic. Personally, I couldn't say for certain who would win.

When the signal sounded, seven of the girls launched themselves forward. Between the two I focused on, Ibuki had the better start. Horikita's reaction was slightly delayed, so she lagged behind the rest of the group. However, she immediately picked up the pace and began to catch up to Ibuki, who seemed distracted. She glanced behind, perhaps curious about Horikita, and the distance between them closed. Ibuki remained stuck in the middle of the group, neither increasing nor decreasing her distance from Horikita.

As they neared the end of the race, Ibuki's expression stiffened. She and Horikita were neck and neck, running side by side. Horikita, looking quite pleased with herself, managed to nudge ahead of Ibuki by a narrow margin.

Ibuki ran harder, fighting to close the distance between herself and Horikita, but Horikita managed to cross the finish line first. After an incredible race like that, everyone erupted into cheers.

Ibuki kicked the ground in frustration. I got the feeling that if she hadn't been so concerned about Horikita, the race results would have been different. Her hyperawareness was the reason Horikita won.

"Those two completely outran everyone else," said Sudou.

After the first-year students' 100-meter dash ended, we went to check the results. Athletic people like Sudou, Horikita, and Hirata had

taken first place, as expected. However, the mid-tier students we'd hoped would do well hadn't performed so great after all.

"Come on. Get it together, everyone. Especially you! Your speed's the only thing you're proud of, right?" said Sudou.

"Y-yeah, but that Shibata dude's just too good, man."

"Nothing we can do about it. Shibata-kun's even faster than me, after all," said Hirata. That was true. I'd seen it during club practice.

Even though we'd gotten off to a good start overall, tracking our scores would get more complicated from here. No notebooks or phones were allowed, and though we could talk to one another about the results, we couldn't know what the other classes were planning.

I approached Horikita, who'd just gotten back.

"That was close," I said.

"Yes, I suppose. Ibuki was faster than I expected," said Horikita. She breathed a sigh of relief.

"So, you reached out to Kouenji," I said.

"Who told you that? Well…it seems like it was meaningless anyway." Horikita looked over toward Kouenji's little hideaway cottage. "I was worried he'd skip out on the competitions, and that's exactly what happened."

"It seems like he doesn't care about reaching Class A."

"Maybe if I was popular like Kushida, I could have gotten to him."

"I don't know about that. I don't think he's the type to listen to Kushida, or even Hirata," I replied. Then again, those two wouldn't have tried to berate Kouenji in the first place. Even though Kouenji was clearly lying about his illness, they wouldn't have called him a liar to his face.

"To think you'd wish you could be more like Kushida," I chided.

"I never hated her or anything." Horikita realized that she'd slipped up, and immediately clamped her mouth shut. "You didn't hear that," she added.

With that, she marched off to watch the third-year students' races, which would start soon. She was concerned for our class, but most likely also worried about her brother. Of course, it wasn't as though her brother, the student council president, cared about his little sister's feelings in the slightest.

Horikita's older brother, as part of the second group to race, naturally took first place.

"He's just as fast as I imagined," I said.

"That's because my brother is perfect. No matter what he does,

he's always number one," Horikita answered. She wasn't bragging. She said it as if it were a simple fact.

After each grade level finished the 100-meter dash, the final results were tallied. The first round of points for the Red and White teams were announced.

Red Team: 2011 points. White Team: 1891 points.

The competition had just begun, but the Red Team was slightly ahead.

6.2

The hurdle race came next. It was like the 100-meter dash in that it was based on speed. However, you also needed to clear hurdles while running. If you knocked down or touched a hurdle, your time was penalized. If you knocked the hurdle down, the penalty was 0.5 seconds. If you only touched it, 0.3 seconds. There were ten hurdles in all, placed at ten-meter intervals. If you knocked them all down, you'd have five seconds added to your time. It'd be completely hopeless.

Sudou was starting in this competition's final group. "If you guys place last, I'm gonna slap you," he said.

The unathletic students trembled at the pressure.

"Dude, what kinda tyrant are you?"

"Hey, um, is Sotomura-kun here? If he's absent, he'll be disqualified," said the referee.

"R-regrettably, it would appear that my stomach is upset. Would it be permissible for me to take an absence?" asked the Professor. He'd just barely cleared the hurdles during practice, and looked as though he was chickening out.

"Huh? Dude, it's fine if you knock all the hurdles down. Finish the race at any cost!" shouted Sudou. He stuck his face close to the Professor's and glared.

"Egad! O-okay, I will!" shouted the Professor.

There was a significant difference between coming in last and being disqualified. If you were disqualified, you wouldn't get even one point. Participation was vital.

In the end, the Professor didn't clear any hurdles. He knocked them all over and finished in last place. "Ugh, he's useless. It's 'cause he just sits around on his butt that he's so fat," grumbled Sudou. "Still, that Shibata guy is pretty good."

Shibata had come in first without much difficulty, and was shaping up to be Sudou's main rival. Furthermore, like Ichinose, his leadership qualities made others rally around him. If Shibata kept this up, Sudou's goal of being first out of every student across every grade level would become a distant dream, especially since no one knew what the team competition results would be. It was concerning.

"Next up is the fourth group. Please get ready," said the referee.

I got into the same lane as before, and saw Kanzaki standing in

the second lane.

"We meet again," said Kanzaki.

"Go easy on me," I told him.

"Ichinose says you're pretty fast," he replied.

I didn't know where Ichinose had gotten that idea. Then again, back during the incident with Sakura's stalker, she might have seen me running. Apparently, she paid close attention.

"Didn't you see my ranking in the 100-meter dash earlier? I got fifth."

"It didn't seem to me that you were taking the race seriously," Kanzaki replied.

"There's no advantage to gain from holding back, right? You just lose," I responded.

"When you think of it as a strategy, it's not completely meaningless," he said flatly.

Apparently, Ichinose and Class B really did their homework. They didn't just know my ranking; they also understood my thought process.

"You know, you're really calm for a high schooler," Kanzaki added. "It's scary."

"Well, feel free to judge me however you want."

A boy from Class C got between us, cutting our chat short. With the exception of Kanzaki, I didn't really know anyone in the fourth group, which meant that I didn't know how fast the other competitors were. If my ranking rose even a little bit, it could be bad.

When the signal came, I started running about as fast as I had before. Kanzaki overtook me, but because only one other student got in front of me, I ultimately ended up winning a fairly respectable third place. There were a lot of variables to consider, but for better or worse, I'd been able to maintain my inconspicuous position. I walked back to camp.

"Aah, jeez. I can't keep up," groaned Yukimura.

He was grumbling to himself, seeming downtrodden. From the looks of things, he hadn't gotten good results during his second event.

"That bad, huh?" I asked.

"Ayanokouji? Agh, I've been cursed. Seventh and seventh," he grumbled. *Twice a consolation prize winner, huh?* That was pretty rough.

"It all depends on your mindset, Yukimura. Even if you fail here, you can ace the written tests. Right?" I replied.

"I won't fail, but my scores will plummet. Besides, I'll drag down my class and my team," said Yukimura.

Since Yukimura wanted to make it into Class A more than anyone else, he also felt the burden of responsibility more intensely than anyone. And because he normally criticized students with low academic ability, like Sudou, he was probably reluctant to show any weakness here.

I didn't want to say the wrong thing, so I decided to give Yukimura space, and focused on the girls' hurdle races instead. Two people I knew were running in the first race: Horikita and Sakura. Horikita, who expected to win, didn't seem to feel any pressure. On the other hand, as bad as it sounded, we had zero expectations for Sakura. She appeared to be trembling.

"Hey, um, Horikita-san. This matchup isn't very good, don't you think?" said Hirata.

"Really?" replied Horikita.

"Class C's fastest students are Yajima-san and Kinoshita-san from the track and field club. They're both in your group," said Hirata.

"I see."

"Winning might be difficult."

Hirata turned out to be right. Horikita threw everything she had into the race, but the two from Class C got ahead of her, and she ended in third place. After the race finished, Hirata looked over at me. I could tell that he felt uneasy about the way the composition of Horikita's group had turned out.

6.3

The next competition was capture the flag. Though simple, it was still a fierce and slightly dangerous event.

"All right. We're definitely winning this one, guys. Since that moron Kouenji ain't here, we've gotta get that much more fired up!" shouted Sudou.

He was trying to inspire the Class A and D guys assembled in front of him. They were facing off against the guys from Class B, led by Kanzaki and Shibata, and from Class C, led by Ryuuen. Some particularly formidable-looking Class C students were in that group, although we didn't know them. There were Sakazaki and Komiya, two students who had been involved in that fight with Sudou a while back. There was also a large, brawny half-Japanese and half-black student named Yamada. I'd seen him around school on occasion, and wondered just how strong he really was.

Well, there was nothing to do but fight with everything we had. According to the game rules, the group that made two captures would win. During their earlier discussion, Katsuragi and Hirata had decided that our classes would swap back and forth between offense and defense. Class D would be on the offensive first, while Class A would protect the flag. If we successfully got a head start, we'd prioritize keeping that momentum and continue with our roles.

"Well, don't worry. I'll beat our enemies to a pulp single-handed," said Sudou.

"Uh, but aren't you supposed to go after the flag?" I was getting a little worried.

"Can't make any promises. I'm all pissed off, thanks to Kouenji. Grr," Sudou growled.

He flipped the other team off, not even trying to hide his hostility.

"Better keep my distance," Ike muttered.

The offensive team (mainly Sudou, though) waited impatiently, standing at the ready. On the other hand, the defensive team—consisting of Katsuragi and the others—checked the status of their formation several times over, making sure to establish a solid defense.

Blatant violence, like punching and kicking, was naturally prohibited. However, the school would overlook a certain degree of roughhousing. Pushing, grabbing, and such were expected.

“Ugh. I’m starting to feel a little scared. This is the first time I’ve played capture the flag.”

“Wait. Didn’t you have it in a junior-high sports festival or something?”

“No one ever told me that it was gonna be dangerous! Have you played this game before, Ayanokouji?”

“Nope. This is a first for me, too,” I replied.

“The hell, dude? A first for you, too?”

While we talked, the signal went off. Sudou charged in headfirst, ahead of everyone else. Soon the more assertive players followed right after him.

“Dude, this is bad! Let’s go, Ayanokouji! I really don’t want Sudou to kill me for trying to skip out!” Ike wailed.

The less-aggressive students included Ike, Yukimura, and myself. We slowly brought up the rear. Like us, the B and C group had neatly divided their forces between offense and defense. It looked as though Class B was defending the flag in the first round. They waited for us up ahead.

It was forbidden for an attacking team to come into contact with the other side’s attacking team. The rules stated that the offense had to focus as much as possible on capturing the flag.

“Anyone who wants to die, bring it!” Sudou drove right into the opponents’ defensive line. Using his height, and a level of power unimaginable for a first-year high schooler, he tore through the students around the flag, one after another.

“Stop him! Stop Sudou!” shouted someone from Class B. A number of students on the defending team surrounded Sudou.

“Hey, you guys. Come quick! Here, I’ll clear the way!” yelled Sudou, not even looking back while he shouted instructions to his advancing allies. Of course, it wasn’t that simple. As the situation grew increasingly chaotic, the players kicked up dust to cloud the air. I decided to make myself as useless and inoffensive as possible, and relied on the Class B students to overcome the situation.

“Shit. Just how many of you are gonna come after me?!”

Three or four guys pushed up against Sudou, managing to overpower him. The advancing group got cut off just as they were on the brink of breaking through. Class D’s problem was that, despite Sudou’s offensive and penetrative powers, no one else could claim to be particularly strong. Students who were especially unaggressive, like the Professor and me, inevitably became a weak link in our offense. In

contrast, many Class B students had above-average strength.

"Dude. This is bad, Ken! Class A! That one half-Japanese guy, Yamada or whatever, he's going on a rampage!"

"Huh?!"

Sudou turned around to look. The Red Team's flag, which Class A had been protecting, looked slightly askew. Class C was full of violent people like Sudou. Actually, it was full of students who were almost martial artists, in a way. It was pretty clear who held the advantage.

We needed to do something. But four or five people blocked Sudou—our side's crucial player—so he was helpless. We were completely locked down. Sudou desperately tried to race for the flag, but unfortunately, the whistle blew. In the end, the White Team managed to get the first point.

"Ah, come on! What are you guys even doing?! C'mon, fight like your lives depend on it!" shouted Sudou.

"Dude, you telling us that doesn't help. It's just, like, those guys are really strong, you know? Ouch! Uh, I got a scrape, man."

"Come on, it's just a scratch! Grit your teeth and man up. I don't care what you do. Bite, kick 'em in the knees, but do something to fight back, man! You're useless!" shouted Sudou.

I understood how he felt, but either of those actions could be considered foul play, and a way to get expelled in one go.

"There's no use complaining. They won the first round. Next time, let's make sure to protect our flag properly," said Hirata, gently patting Sudou on the shoulder.

"Tch. All right, this time we're *definitely* gonna protect our flag. Right, everyone?!"

"Y-yeah, we got it. We'll do whatever we can."

"No, don't just 'do whatever you can.' We're *definitely* protecting it, for sure. Even if it's for an hour—or *two* hours!"

Class D also lacked things like unity and motivation. Meanwhile, Class B was completely united. The students were highly motivated, so they made formidable foes.

"Ayanokouji, don't let the flag go down, even if you die! Even if it's just a joke, you're still number two in the class!" said Sudou.

Apparently, ranking right below Sudou in terms of strength meant that I needed to protect the flag alongside him. I couldn't slack off with him watching.

"All right, no screwing around! We can't let 'em get another win! I'm gonna send that jerk Ryuuen flying!"

During the first round, Ryuuen had been on the attacking team. However, he had really just stayed back and observed, probably because they were already dominating our side. Sudou likely hated that.

"All right. Come on and attack, C. Come and attack us, C," Sudou muttered.

He could mutter all he liked, but if Class C assembled and launched an attack, we'd be in trouble. It would be better for us if Class B went on the offense. The second round was about to begin. Then, sure enough…

"They're coming! They're coming, they're coming!"

Apparently, things were progressing exactly as Sudou wished. The powerful Class C students geared up to launch their attack, Ryuuen laughing fearlessly from the rear. As if he were a general commanding his troops in battle, he gave the order to charge.

Students who looked as big and brawny as Sudou rushed us headfirst. The Class D students screamed. Our outer wall of defense was rapidly crumbling.

"Stand! Grab their legs and pull them down!" Our opponents' angry roars drowned out Sudou's words of encouragement.

The Class C students repeatedly used elbow strikes, which were nearly foul play. In practically no time at all, they broke through to the center. Katsuragi from Class A had also advanced to where he could nearly touch their flag, but I wondered if he'd make it in time.

"Gah!"

I heard an agonized cry from Sudou, who was supporting the already-tilted flag. The half-Japanese guy, Yamada, had gotten up close. His physical mass far surpassed Sudou's.

"Who the hell punched me in the stomach?!"

In the chaos, someone had attacked Sudou directly. Judging by how angry and pained he sounded, it probably hadn't been just once or twice, either. However, there was nothing Sudou could do about it. With our flag in his hands, all he could do was bear it and brace himself, like a turtle trying to hide in its shell.

"Ow. Damn. That hurts, you jerks!"

However, Class C showed no sign of stopping. Sudou fell to his knees in pain, and someone stomped on his back. It was a fiendishly low blow, even in the midst of a particularly messy and chaotic match. Of course, the perpetrator was none other than Ryuuen.

"Y-you bastard! Ugh!"

Ryuuen bore down hard again mercilessly, with such force that I

feared he might break Sudou's spine. When Sudou collapsed, the flag lost its support, producing a cloud of dust as it fell to the ground. In the blink of an eye, it was over.

Still collapsed on the ground, Sudou glared up at Ryuuen.

"Uh-uh, you jerk. That was foul play!"

"Hmm? Oh, I didn't notice you," replied Ryuuen. He picked up the flag without any hesitation. Sudou tried to go after him, but due to the pain, couldn't yet stand back up. The Class D and A coalition had suffered a great loss.

"Hey, is your back okay?"

"Ugh. I think I'm all right, somehow. Damn! Goddamn it!" Sudou's anger seemed greater than his pain. "That smug ass! The next time I run into him, I'm gonna lay him out flat!"

"You'd only cause another scandal. Do you want a repeat of last time?" I asked. I was referring to the day when Sudou got into a fight with Class C students, and was almost expelled as a result.

"So, it's okay when *he* does it, but not when I do it?! Look at my back!" Sudou shouted.

"I get it, but they'll probably just claim it happened in the heat of the moment," I told him.

"Ah, I'm so pissed! And here I was, planning on winning every contest!" he grumbled.

The Class A students could hear this, and some guys sent glares Sudou's way. Katsuragi stopped them before they could retort. "I apologize that we weren't of much use," he said.

"No, *I* should apologize. It's because we couldn't protect the flag. Let's do our best in the next game," replied Hirata.

For the time being, we disbanded and returned to our own tents.

6.4

With no time to rest, the first-year boys got ready for the tug-of-war. Meanwhile, the first-year girls were making steady progress in their ball toss. The team competitions continued. I hadn't paid much attention at first, but the competition order was fairly arduous. It took a lot out of us.

"How much of a gap between the teams do you think there is now?" asked Sudou.

"Dunno. Things just got started. No use thinking about it yet," I answered.

"That's true, I guess. Still, a loss is a loss. They're one step ahead of us now, right?" said Sudou. He fidgeted while he watched the girls' match, unable to stand the fact that we'd lost. "It'll be good if the girls win this one, at least," he muttered.

Because we were some distance away, we couldn't clearly discern how the ball toss would end. All I could think was that it looked like a close battle. The game finished soon afterward, and the teacher in charge counted up the points while clearing away the balls.

"With fifty-four points total, the Red Team wins."

The girls had canceled out the boys' disappointing capture-the-flag results. Our relief was fleeting, because the referee called us over to start the tug-of-war.

"All right, let's do this!" said Sudou.

"Hey, is your back okay, Ken?" asked Ike.

"S'okay. I'm tougher than most, so I'm all right. Besides, even if it hurts, there's nothing I can do about it," said Sudou.

Even though we were worried, Sudou stood strong. The rules for tug-of-war were extremely simple. It was almost exactly the same as capture the flag; the first team to get two points won.

"If we make a comeback in the tug-of-war, we can turn the team competitions around. Besides, in tug-of-war, there's no physical contact. That means both sides have to rely purely on their own strength. It shouldn't turn into some ridiculous brawl," said Hirata.

Hirata was always mindful of those around him. Sudou looked pleased.

"Guess you're right. That's exactly why we can't lose this," Sudou said.

A pure test of strength; our power and wits against theirs. Who would triumph? As the four classes gathered, we split into two groups to the left and right. Katsuragi drew near Hirata and whispered something quietly into the other boy's ear.

"Okay. Just like we discussed, we'll use our strategy to beat them in a single stroke. Sound good?" asked Katsuragi.

"Yes. Got it. All right, everyone. Get in position," said Hirata.

We'd come up with a strategy under their leadership, like we did for capture the flag. After Hirata gave us instructions, Class D took our positions on the field. The strategy was simple, boiling down to "line up in order of height." By doing so, we could apply our strength without any unevenness. The opposing team would see this, but even if they tried to imitate us, they couldn't line up by height in such a short time span.

However, our Class D/A coalition already had another problem. Unlike the guys in Class D, half the Class A guys didn't budge an inch.

"Hey, Katsuragi-kun, stop ordering us around," said one boy.

"What do you mean by that, Hashimoto?" asked Katsuragi.

Hashimoto took one step forward. A tall, somewhat distant-looking guy, he had his long hair swept to the back of his head. He wore a gentle expression, but he had harsh, cynical eyes.

"Exactly what I said. It's your fault that Class A is in a slump now. Are you sure this strategy will let us win?" asked Hashimoto.

I couldn't imagine that he was acting alone. The timing was too strange. While Class A focused on Katsuragi and Hashimoto, I looked back toward our camp, searching for Sakayanagi. Sakayanagi, who'd been observing from the very beginning, wore a thin smile. It could only mean one thing.

She instigated this whole thing. Perhaps she intended to do whatever it took to crush her opposition, Katsuragi. Her behavior was unsettling, but in a different way than Ryuuen's.

"What do you say, Katsuragi-kun? Can we really win?" asked Hashimoto.

Despite the fact that he'd been betrayed, Katsuragi didn't appear to be panicking. "We're upsetting Class D. We should proceed calmly," he replied.

"That's not an answer." The half of Class A following Hashimoto showed no sign of obedience.

"Hey, Katsuragi-san's telling you to do something. Hurry up and do it! Enough with the shameful behavior!" Yahiko, from Katsuragi's

faction, shouted at Sakayanagi's faction. He thrust the rope toward one of the rebels.

"I understand the doubts you might have about my leadership. But if we lose because of meaningless bickering, it won't be our lack of cooperation or skill to blame. It will be Sakayanagi's fault. Do you want that?" asked Katsuragi.

"You really are blind, huh, Katsuragi-kun?" Hashimoto sneered. The referee approached us, looking as though he was about to give us a warning. Hashimoto gripped the rope and settled into his designated position. "Shall we? Like you said, it would be *ever* so annoying if we made you think we weren't cooperating."

Class A's internal strife seemed to have subsided for the time being. We got into position.

"Man, those Class A guys really are bloodthirsty, aren't they?"

"I'm really, really worried now. They might just be a bunch of noodle-armed nerds, after all."

Even Sudou could tell that Class A's internal conflict was dangerous. At any rate, everyone followed Katsuragi and Hirata's orders, and lined up in order of height. Sudou was the furthest back.

On the opposing side, the B/C group didn't seem to be cooperating, their forces cleanly divided by class. Class B took charge at the front of the rope, but they chose the strategy opposite ours, lining up with the tallest in front. Since Class C had lined up completely at random, their lineup would just fall apart. They did have some tough-looking students in the far back, I supposed, but I couldn't shake the feeling that they were a mess.

"Heh! Class B put their biggest dudes up way up in front. They just don't get it at all, do they?" Sudou gloated.

"I wouldn't necessarily say that's true. When you're pulling the rope, an elevated position is advantageous," said Hirata.

"Even so, that don't change the fact that we got the advantage. Come on, let's do this!" shouted Sudou.

Just then the signal went off, and we immediately pulled on the rope.

"And pull! And pull!"

The D/A coalition worked together with great vigor, shouting the standard tug-of-war battle cry. At first, it looked as though the two sides were evenly matched, but after a few seconds, the game started to shift in our favor.

"Go, go, go! Come on, easy!"

Before long, we heard the signal that the match had ended, and that the D/A team had scored a point.

"Hell yeah! You see that?! Serves 'em right!" Sudou howled.

In response, the Class B guys confronted Class C, their discontent obvious. "Hey, it'll be really bad if we don't work together, you know? These guys are crazy strong," Shibata said to Ryuuen.

But Ryuuen ignored him. "All right, time to switch things up. Line up with the shortest in front," he barked at his class instead. He issued directions to the scattered Class C, adjusting them so that they stood in order of height. We now formed a perfect bow shape.

Shibata shook his head, shouted words of encouragement to his class, and grabbed the rope once more.

"We got this. With those guys lined up like that, there's no way they'll win," said Sudou.

"We can't say that for sure. Everyone, keep your guard up. The next round won't be like the first," said Katsuragi.

"Why, though? It was an easy win, man. Look, they ain't even lining up by height, like we are," said Ike.

The signal went off.

"And pull! And pull!"

The D/A coalition pulled, just like we did the first time. However, facing a new level of resistance caused our group to panic a little. No matter how hard we pulled, the rope didn't budge. Anxiety started to creep in.

"Hey, you guys better stick this out. If you lose here, I'll kill you," warned Ryuuen.

We felt an intense surge of power come from our opponents' side, starting to drag us over the line. It couldn't possibly have been that their strength welled up just from Ryuuen's one command alone. Something about the bow-like shape of this arrangement gave them more leverage.

"Geh! Ow! Oww!"

I could hear pained cries from Ike and the others holding the rope in the rear. I was also pulling with everything I had, but the resistance I felt was completely unlike the first round. The D/A coalition was dragged forward, little by little, until we lost.

"The hell? Why was it different from before?! Hey, is someone holding back?!" The students on our team started to turn on their allies.

Katsuragi immediately stepped up and spoke.

"Calm down. We lost because our opponents used the right

formation to beat us. Of course, it's probably true that some students on our side felt overly confident going into the second round. Understand that, even if our opponent's teamwork is in shambles, they can still put up a fight. Brace yourselves, focus your minds, and make sure to check your position. Also, when you pull, make sure that you do it at an angle," said Katsuragi.

Once both sides were ready, the crucial third round began.

"And pull! And pull! Pull!"

Just like before, things weren't decided immediately. The white flag attached to the rope fluttered above the center line without moving.

"Keep on it, guys! We're definitely going to win!" shouted Sudou. At his words, everyone started working together in unison.

"And pull! And pull!"

The white flag moved slightly toward the D/A coalition's side.

"No slacking off! Come on, one more pull! Puuullll!" shouted Sudou, bellowing a war cry.

Suddenly, the incredible resistance we'd been facing vanished, and everyone on our side tumbled over backward. Unable to immediately grasp what had happened, students started yelling at one another.

Our opponents had let go of the rope.

"Hey, what the hell? Don't screw with us!" Some Class B students had fallen over, too, so they clearly hadn't expected this turn of events. Before long, everyone directed their ire toward Ryuuen and his group.

"I decided to take a break, since I thought we couldn't win," said Ryuuen. So, they'd given up? He turned to us and sneered. "Good for you. You managed to pick up a meaningless win. It's hilarious to see you all crawling on the ground."

Even though he'd lost, Ryuuen smiled.

"Jerk!" Sudou stood up and charged at Ryuuen, still angry over the capture-the-flag incident. However, Katsuragi grabbed Sudou's arms and stopped him.

"This is all part of Ryuuen's plan. He wants to make us waste our energy. He might also be trying to egg us on to violence, so that we're accused of foul play."

"But—"

"What they did was unsportsmanlike, but it wasn't a violation of the rules," said Katsuragi.

Katsuragi wasn't in Class A for no reason. His control was

masterful. Ryuuen turned his back on us, perhaps because he knew that further provocation would get him nothing.

"Okay, get up!" he shouted at his group. The boys from Class C immediately stood.

"It looks like we got lucky. Thank goodness we don't have to try working with Class C," said Katsuragi as he patted Sudou on the shoulder.

"Man… We won, but I don't feel good about it at all. Damn it," Sudou grumbled.

I understood his feelings. We'd finally won a team competition, but Ryuuen managed to put a damper on it. We were all frowning a little. With the tug-of-war ended, we went back to our tents.

On the way, Katsuragi came up to Hirata and offered him a quiet apology. "Sorry for earlier. I wasn't able to lead my class," he told Hirata.

"Oh, please, don't worry about it. It's our fault we let our guard down in the second round. Right?" Hirata looked to me for confirmation, so I nodded.

"Things are rough in Class A, huh?"

"Yeah."

Katsuragi didn't elaborate any further on the matter. All we knew for certain was that he seemed to be in quite a difficult position. Meanwhile, Sudou had already shifted gears to thinking about the upcoming competition.

"Next up is the obstacle course race. If anyone does bad, I'm gonna lay 'em flat," said Sudou.

"Ugh. Why do you have to hit us?"

"Cause I'm the leader. I need to kick the asses of the people under me. It's a tough job," said Sudou.

No one really wanted such a leader, but you couldn't exactly oppose Sudou.

"For reference, what outcomes would you consider disappointing?"

"Ain't that obvious, dude? I won't accept anything besides victory!"

"Harsh!"

6.5

"Hah…hah… Man, I ran my heart out, and I still only got sixth place! H-has Ken not gone up yet? Puh…" Ike breathed heavily as he fell to his knees. He was probably terrified of Sudou's wrath. "You don't think he'd get, like, fourth place or something, do you?"

I understood Ike's concern. If Sudou didn't win his own race, he'd surely take that out on the rest of the group.

"What place did you get, Ayanokouji?" Ike demanded. "Will you get Sudou's death penalty?"

"Just barely managed third place," I answered.

"Ugh, no way. Seriously? Man, talk about being saved by the lineup," said Ike.

Well, it seemed like invoking Sudou's ire would be a hassle. That was why I decided to put in a little effort.

"Looks like Sudou-kun is going up against Shibata-kun."

"Uh, yeah."

Shibata was doing light warm-up exercises as he waited for his race to start. Sudou had a formidable opponent.

"Huh?! Wait—the other guys Ken's up against are Nomura and Suzuki! Dude, not fair!"

Ike looked genuinely frustrated upon seeing what a fortunate lineup Sudou had. The two Class C students in question were said to be especially unathletic. The two Class A students in the group weren't really that good, either, so Sudou's victory was pretty much guaranteed.

However, Shibata was different. He was rumored to be Class B's fastest runner, and he was undoubtedly going to fight to reach first place. In the two competitions leading up to this, he had won first both times.

"Who do you think's going to win?" I asked Hirata. He knew Shibata well.

"I don't know, honestly. If it were a purely straightforward match, Shibata-kun might take first place, but Sudou-kun overcame all the obstacles without much difficulty during practice. I think it's going to be an incredible race."

Hirata wasn't sure. Sudou thought that there was no possible way he could lose. Hopefully, his pride wouldn't get in the way of his running. I put aside my worries as the race started.

Both Sudou and Shibata got off to a good start. They were neck and neck as they headed toward the first obstacle, the balance beam. Though Sudou was tall and large, he was able to cross the narrow balance beam faster than anyone else. He had incredible balance. Shibata was in second place. Despite the fact that he lagged slightly behind Sudou, he also managed to safely cross the beam.

After sprinting a short distance, they crawled through a net placed on the ground. Sudou advanced like some kind of wild beast. Shibata chased after him, looking as though he was having fun. The last obstacle was a sack race. Everyone jumped in their sacks and started hopping. Sudou managed to clear the race with dexterity that belied his large frame, but Shibata was closing the distance between them.

"This is the most intense match so far today," said Hirata.

Sudou and Shibata seemed to be physically matched, so it looked as if they were trying to change up their strategies. Shibata kept a steady pace. Sudou started to rush for the first time. He probably heard Shibata closing in on him. However, Sudou managed to stay ahead, and in the end, was the first to cut through the tape at the finish line. Going all out like that clearly affected him. Even from this distance, you could see him breathing heavily.

Sudou and Shibata had been evenly matched in speed. It was like Hirata had said: in pure speed alone, Shibata might actually have been superior. Sudou wasn't invincible after all.

In any case, Sudou had managed to win first place three times in a row. He was, without question, one of the best athletes in our entire school.

Sudou, making his proud return, immediately confronted a shrinking Ike. "Hey. I was watching you, Kanji! The hell, man, sixth place?!"

"H-hey, you almost didn't get first just now, dude! We're practically equal!" blubbered Ike.

This equality was utterly imaginary. Sudou pinned Ike's arms behind his back, putting him in a nelson hold.

"Phew. Got first place. Still, though, that Shibata guy was really fast. Thankfully, I managed to beat 'im," said Sudou.

6.6

We didn't have any time to slack off before we needed to prepare for the three-legged race. Meanwhile, it looked as though things were getting rocky for the first-year girls on the obstacle course. Horikita was doing her best, but the two Class C students had put some distance between themselves and her right at the start of the race.

"I've seen this happen before."

"Looks like she's in the same group as Yajima-san and Kinoshita-san again."

Horikita was gifted at both athletics and academics, but trying to beat someone who specialized in one of those two wasn't an easy task. When the race started, Kinoshita had dashed forward, bolting straight toward the balance beam. She made it there first and put a lot of distance between herself and those behind her. Yajima was now in second place. Horikita followed in third.

Unlike the 100-meter dash or the hurdle race, both of which relied purely on speed and stamina, there were numerous unknown variables in the obstacle course. After the girls passed the balance beam, the distance between them shrank until they were practically all neck and neck.

"Looks like she's got a chance."

Sudou cheered Horikita on, his hands tightly balled into fists. By the time the girls started crawling through the net, Horikita had taken the lead. However, Kinoshita was fast. In between obstacles, she closed and shortened the distance between herself and Horikita. She managed to stay in second place.

Yajima wasn't about to be thrown out of first. Horikita sprinted forward with everything she had to try and steal second place. When Kinoshita was thrown off balance during the obstacle course's final leg, the sack race, Horikita closed the distance between them. When she passed the girl, Horikita raced forward as quickly as possible. The distance between herself and Kinoshita could only have been one or two seconds.

Horikita ran at top speed for the final fifty meters of the race. However, she must have been concerned about Kinoshita closing in on her, because she repeatedly glanced over her shoulder. That caused her speed to drop, and soon the two were once again side by side. Suddenly

Horikita, who'd been trying to slip past Kinoshita, and Kinoshita, who was trying to catch up, became entangled and fell down.

"Whoa! Hey, something big just happened!"

I was too far away, so I couldn't tell who had run into whom. While they got back up, other students passed them by, and Horikita and Kinoshita plummeted to the bottom of the rankings. They both desperately struggled to get back on their feet amid a cloud of dust.

Although they kept going, the incident affected them. In the end, Horikita finished in an unbelievable seventh place. Kinoshita ended up getting last place due to significant pain in her leg, which rendered her unable to continue to run.

Horikita had placed first, then third, and now seventh. We had no choice but to say that it'd been an unfortunate accident.

"……"

"What's the matter, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"If an 'accident' were to happen again, that might be too much to believe," I answered.

"You think so, too? I'd say the others are also starting to realize that. This doesn't bode well," Hirata replied.

Unfortunately, he was right on the money. "Can I leave you to take care of everyone?" I asked.

"Of course. That's my role, after all. But isn't there something we can do?"

"I wish," I answered.

It was a relief to see Hirata accept the task without even a hint of disgust. I headed over to Horikita, who had a sullen look on her face.

"Does it hurt?" I asked her.

"A little. But it won't affect the competition. If I rest, I'll be okay."

She tried to look tough, but she was having a difficult time just sitting down. Preparing myself to be pummeled, I lightly touched her injury.

"Ow!"

"This isn't going to affect the competition, huh?"

"Don't just go touching me. Leave me alone. I'll grin and bear it," said Horikita.

To be in a position of so much responsibility could be hard. Especially for people like Horikita, who took pride in their ability to produce results.

"Well, I suppose you won't get any points if you withdraw. I understand your desire to hang on."

I expected her to glare at me for poking her, but she changed the topic. “That girl’s a sneak. It’s like she was looking to hurt me,” said Horikita.

“What do you mean?”

“While she was running behind me, she called my name over and over.”

So, that was why Horikita had looked behind so many times during the race.

“As soon as I turned back to see her, we ran into each other. It looked like an accident, but if so, then why was she calling my name? Honestly, I can’t keep up with this. To think that we’re still in the middle…” said Horikita.

She was the third student to be injured. One second-year had fallen during the race, and had to withdraw because of the pain, but that at least had seemed to be an isolated incident among the upperclassmen.

“Anyway,” Horikita said. “Don’t worry about me. Worry about yourself. Your results are worse than mine, aren’t they?” She currently had thirty points. I had twenty-seven.

“I’ll do everything I can. But don’t push yourself, all right?”

“I’ll participate, even if I have to crawl,” said Horikita.

I left her and started preparing for the next competition, the three-legged race.

“How’s Horikita-san doing?” asked Hirata. He sounded worried.

“It’s pretty serious. It’ll probably affect other events,” I replied.

“This is bad,” he responded.

Hirata and I continued talking while he tied our legs together for the first-year boys’ three-legged race. The races followed right on one another’s heels. It was incredible execution on the school’s part, structured as effectively as a live television program.

Because a three-legged race meant two people per team, only a scant four teams could run at once. Sudou, who was one group ahead of us, was starting the race. He was partnered with Ike, and clearly still suppressing a lot of bottled-up rage.

Sudou bolted down the track with all his strength, practically carrying Ike with him. “Aaahhh!” Ike cried in agony.

It came close to foul play, but still just barely counted. They successfully nabbed first place, Sudou forcibly supporting Ike so that he wouldn’t collapse.

“Sudou-kun can be incredibly reliable, can’t he?” asked Hirata.

“Yeah. But if we want to win, then Sudou alone isn’t enough,” I replied. If Sudou was uncontrollable, he could very well be a double-edged sword that would hurt us.

“All right, we’re up next,” said Hirata.

We started the race. Fortunately, no other notable people were running with us. Since we were highly compatible partners, we ended up finishing in first place. No one could complain about that.

“Whooo! Hirata-kun’s so cool!”

However, it was painful to listen to all the girls cheer only for Hirata.

Next came the first-year girls’ three-legged race. Horikita, who was learning to compromise, and Kushida, always willing to compromise, were paired and set to go for the second round. Their relationship was especially awful, but maybe a desire to win would bridge that gap. To me, they were a truly bizarre pair. But to the rest of Class D, they probably looked like a safe, reliable team.

They got off to a good start, taking second place. Not bad. Cheers came from the onlookers.

“Go, Suzune!” Sudou got a little carried away and called out Horikita’s still-forbidden first name. His voice probably didn’t reach her, though, so he was likely safe.

However, Horikita and Kushida slowed down, and their ranking dropped. Before we knew it, two girls from Class A took first place. They were beautiful young women with the same haughty aura as Horikita. The Class C team, which included Yajima, came second.

“Something seems off,” I muttered.

“Huh? What does?” asked Sudou.

“Well, Horikita’s movements look stiff,” I replied.

“Now that you mention it, yeah. They do,” said Sudou.

During practice, Horikita had always pulled her partner along, but in the actual event, Kushida was taking the lead. Just as I’d expected, Horikita’s leg pain was affecting her.

She was desperately pushing herself to keep up, but her body just couldn’t handle it. The gap between the first and second place teams began to widen, rather than shrink. In last place came the Class B pair. Horikita and Kushida shifted into the next lane so that they wouldn’t lose. Were they trying to obstruct Class B?

Class B doggedly tried to slip past, but couldn’t, since they were moving at the same speed as Horikita and Kushida. The audience cheered at this struggle for third place. Focusing too much on

obstructing Class B meant that Horikita and Kushida let their guard down for a moment, which gave Class B a chance to turn things around.

“Awww, that’s so disappointing!”

They did their best, but Horikita and Kushida came in last. Our victory was, once again, far out of reach.

6.7

We had a ten-minute break, so people went to the bathroom, or off to get a drink of water. Horikita said that she was going to the nurse's office for a poultice and headed toward the school. I supposed it was better than nothing.

I didn't go anywhere. Instead, I stayed and observed the other classes. It was possible to pick up all sorts of information just by observing from afar. Class A was especially interesting, as I'd suspected.

The rivalry between Katsuragi and Sakayanagi was visible from my location. The two distinct factions were obvious; there was practically no contact at all between them. It was by no means strange for a class to have two appointed leaders. Even though Hirata was the head of our own class, we still had Karuizawa and Kushida, and Sudou was leading us in this sports festival. Despite many upheavals, however, Class D weren't fractured by infighting the way Class A was. Their blatant hostility was incredibly clear during this festival.

"Amazing that they've gotten this far with such internal discord," I said.

Sakayanagi's faction had greater numbers. When Hirata came back from washing his hands, I decided to ask him a question. "What kind of student is Sakayanagi?"

"So, you're also curious about her, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Well, yeah. I got curious when I heard that she matched Katsuragi as a leader," I replied.

I didn't understand Sakayanagi's mindset, her way of doing things. During this festival, she hadn't given a single order, remaining completely silent. Still, she looked as if she were plotting to get in Katsuragi's way. She wasn't interested in fighting with other classes; her focus was on Class A alone. It looked as though she was willing to lose out on points if it meant Katsuragi's downfall.

"She's very polite, she's good with people, and she's mature. I didn't think there was anything especially strange about her. Students from other classes probably feel the same, but it seems like Class A disagrees. I've heard people say that Sakayanagi is aggressive and ruthless," said Hirata.

However, we couldn't just take the word of her opponents as gospel, either. We hadn't even had a conversation with her yet. Besides,

it'd be hard for her to interfere in the sports festival. Since her body prevented her from physical exertion, she might not intend to act openly.

"I don't think we need to be concerned about Class A right now. We're allies here, after all."

"Yeah, that's true." At the very least, Class A probably wasn't scheming to get in our way or anything. Nothing like that had happened so far.

On the other hand, I wouldn't have been surprised if Class C was plotting to disrupt us somehow. I looked toward their camp and saw male students gathered around Ryuuen, as if he were a king holding court.

Right now, his strategy was the most alien of all. Even in the sports festival, he was trying to cause psychological harm. He wanted to create lasting damage. Sudou, in particular, had been on the receiving end of Ryuuen's tactics, and was deeply unsettled. I was sure Ryuuen had more tricks up his sleeve.

Finally, I wondered how Class B was doing. Working together with Class C while the possibility of betrayal was very real, and going against Class A, a formidable opponent, had to be intense. Ichinose and the others, cheerful and fair, were giving the competition their all. At a glance, they hadn't changed their usual behavior. Watching their smiles and happy gestures, it basically seemed as though they were genuinely enjoying the festival.

6.8

After our short break, the contests ran in reverse order. It was time for the first-year girls' cavalry battle. This would be yet another showdown between the D/A and B/C coalitions.

The cavalry battle ran on a time limit, and the rules were the same for boys and girls. They dictated that points would be awarded based on the number of enemy units your team defeated in a three-minute period, and how many allied units you had remaining. There were four horsemen to every cavalry unit.

Four students from each class were horsemen, which meant it was an eight-versus-eight battle. Extra students were kept as reserve units, to be substituted as needed. Each horseman was worth fifty points. One horseman in each class was designated the "general," and they were worth 100 points. You could still get points, even if your opponent was left standing, so long as you stole their headband.

Horikita had been chosen to jockey for Class D. Ishizaki, Komiya, and Kondou were supporting her. They weren't bad at all. Mori, Kushida, and Karuizawa were the other jockeys.

The problem was that Mori's unit was filled with unathletic students. There was a good chance that they'd go down first. Their strategy was to make a weak horseman the general, which meant that the weakest link could stay out of the fight, and the three remaining horsemen could protect them.

Once the signal went off, the Class B and C horsemen quietly began to close the distance to Classes A and D. Unsurprisingly, Ibuki was out for blood. A jockey herself, she issued an order and headed right for Horikita. However, Ibuki wasn't the only one.

"H-hey, what the hell?" shouted Ike as he watched the match. Sudou clenched his teeth.

Class C didn't bother attacking Class A at all. They didn't even pay attention to Class D's general or other horsemen. Horikita was their sole target.

Four horsemen attacked her. Was their plan to crush us individually, one after another? Or did they only care about defeating Horikita? If Ryuuen was in command, both seemed possible. The Class D horsemen were outnumbered, but Class A showed no sign of even trying to help. Perhaps they intended to use us as bait, and swoop in to

get the points after we were done.

"They're just going after Horikita, aren't they, dude?!"

"Damn. Ryuuen probably ordered that. Scumbag!" Sudou growled.

"There's nothing we can do about it. Everyone knows that Horikita is Class D's best player on this field."

Ryuuen's tactics weren't bad. Whether in war or competition, the best bet was taking out the opposing side's leader.

Karuizawa and her horsemen rushed to Horikita's rescue first. Shinohara hurried over to support Karuizawa. However, Class B's general, Ichinose, blocked their path. Unlike Class A, Class B was actively supporting their ally team. Now they were on a collision course: Karuizawa versus Ichinose.

Unfortunately, the three girls supporting Karuizawa weren't exactly athletic. Their unit had formed so that they could hang out with their friends. Bad tactics. Meanwhile, Ichinose's unit contained some of the best and most capable people in Class B. Showing no fear, Class B dodged the attack.

Ichinose went for a direct attack, but her movements weren't sharp. Karuizawa managed to react well and launch a counterattack. It was a contest of unity versus maneuverability, and looked as though it would drag on for a while.

"Dude, this is an awesome game!"

The audience cheered. As Karuizawa's group made their move, a horseman's headband was snatched off. Horikita's, as I'd expected.

Four horsemen had attacked her simultaneously. She fell off her unit quite dramatically, collapsed to the ground, and tried to get up, looking frustrated. However, she had nothing to be ashamed of. In a situation like this, even someone like Sudou couldn't have won. Class A and their lack of defense were responsible for her defeat.

In any case, that was that. Horikita's loss triggered an all-out melee. Class D, now down a horseman and pursued by Class B, lost any semblance of coordination in the blink of an eye. Some players fell off their horses, while others had their headbands snatched.

The two horsemen other than Karuizawa tried to resist, but in vain. Karuizawa, who was locked in a fierce battle with Ichinose, found herself in an eight-to-one fight for a moment. Then, at the very end, she managed to snatch a headband from a Class B horseman thanks to her near-suicidal resolve.

Even though they'd lost a horseman, Classes B and C attacked the remaining Class A units and completely wiped them out. Our opponents had only lost a total of two horsemen, but the A/D coalition had suffered a great loss.

Horikita returned to camp grinding her teeth in frustration. Sudou called to her right away.

"Hey, don't worry 'bout it. It was hopeless. Besides, it's the others' fault for being so slow," said Sudou.

"That doesn't change the fact that I lost. Their momentum completely overwhelmed me," replied Horikita.

Class C had primarily targeted Horikita, though. Under those circumstances, no horsemen could've stood a chance.

"Leave it to me. I'll get 'em back for you," said Sudou, trying to sound cool.

Normally, his words wouldn't have reached Horikita at all. However, in her weakened condition, they seemed to resonate. "I'd expect no less of you," she replied.

"All right! Let's go, you guys!" shouted Sudou.

The boy's cavalry battle began. I took the role of a horse on the right of my unit. Sudou was squarely in the middle, and Miyake was on the left. Hirata was our jockey. Thus, our class's strongest unit was born, a warrior without peer, capable of achieving victory even if our allied horsemen were defeated.

"Hey, Hirata. Focus on not getting your headband stolen, and

don't get knocked down. Okay?" said Sudou.

"So, we're using that strategy, huh?" asked Hirata.

"Well, it's 'cause we lost horribly at capture the flag. We got beat really bad. This time, we're gonna show 'em no mercy," said Sudou.

"I have an idea, if it's okay with you guys. While I was watching the girls' match earlier, I thought of a way to win. I already told Katsuragi-kun about it. We can't keep losing at this speed," said Hirata.

When the signal went off, Hirata gave the order. Class D's horsemen joined Class A's. We became one large mass of people, the two classes indistinguishable from each other. Though Class A had basically abandoned Class D entirely during the girls' match, they weren't rooting for us to lose or anything.

Class C's general, Ryuuen, laughed fearlessly as, on Katsuragi's orders, eight horsemen from the D/A coalition rushed at the enemy.

"Aim for that shitty Ryuuen's head! Raaah! Send him packing!"

In the blink of an eye, Hirata's horse, Sudou, bolted ahead at top speed. A horseman from Class B tried to get in the way.

However, Sudou slammed into the enemy with full force, knocking them off-balance. "Get outta my way!" he roared.

"Uwahh!"

The enemy, lacking Sudou's superior physique and ability to fight back, could only collapse, jockey and all.

"Yeah, how about them apples?!"

Like a wild beast, Sudou looked down at the defeated enemy, then turned toward his next prey. Normally, hitting someone would be considered foul play. However, the school had already said that this battle's rules were a bit different. Our strong opening salvo instilled fear in the other team, making them flinch.

However, this strategy did have its drawbacks. If we knocked down a jockey, it would count as a self-KO, not stealing a headband. Those fifty points would vanish into the ether. Still, if we focused solely on stealing headbands, it would be risky.

Sudou clearly relished this strategy, but we couldn't drop our guard. There was a good Class B general whose unit consisted of Kanzaki and Shibata. There was also Ryuuen, and he was riding guys with a lot of power and muscle mass.

The D/A coalition couldn't win unless we took those two out, but it was so hard to read Ryuuen.

"Sudou-kun, let's defeat the opponents around us first and leave Ryuuen-kun for last."

“Huh? C’mon, don’t be boring, man. Let’s aim right for the general’s head!” said Sudou.

“If we get emotional, we’ll play into his hands. Let’s do what’s necessary to win,” said Hirata.

“Tch!”

Two Class C horsemen launched their attack at us. Sudou, despite his grudge against Ryuuen, listened to Hirata.

“All right, all right. Let’s kick the crap outta these guys!”

We needed focus, and our wits about us. During capture the flag, the enemy’s power had overwhelmed us, but things were different this time around.

Sudou defeated three enemy horsemen with ease. Keeping the momentum going, Katsuragi and other Class A students successfully took down Shibata and Kanzaki’s unit, despite losing three of their own players. Ryuuen was the sole remaining enemy. Both Hirata and Katsuragi’s units had survived, and one additional Class D horseman remained. We had a chance.

“Yeah! Yeah!! It’s three on one now, right? We got this!”

As we surrounded Ryuuen, Katsuragi and Hirata exchanged looks. The other horsemen kept their distance, but still targeted Ryuuen. Since he’d been able to steal a headband, I realized just how powerful Ryuuen’s unit was. But, even so, we outnumbered him.

However, Ryuuen didn’t panic. In fact, it was the opposite; he looked as though he was actually enjoying this.

If Hirata and Katsuragi attacked him at the same time, one of them could snatch Ryuuen’s headband, even if that meant sacrificing the other. In that case, our victory would be practically guaranteed. This was the moment to go for the kill.

“Oh, I remember your name. Sudou. When I stepped on you earlier, it looked quite painful,” Ryuuen sneered.

“Yeah, keep talkin’. I’m gonna return the favor,” replied Sudou.

“You talk a pretty big game for a simple beast of burden. I have to say, it feels good to look down on you,” said Ryuuen.

“Heh. Just because you’re ridin’ on top don’t mean you’re a big deal yourself,” snapped Sudou.

“Oh? I guess this is all meaningless, unless we settle things one-on-one,” said Ryuuen.

“Huh?”

“If you can only beat me when it’s two against one, I suppose that’s that. However, ‘winning’ only means something when the playing

field is level," said Ryuuen. "But could you handle that?"

"The heck?!"

"Sudou-kun, don't listen. This is a bad idea. Let's cooperate with Katsuragi-kun," said Hirata.

"You just don't get it," Sudou told Ryuuen.

"No, *you* don't get it, Sudou. You've taken down those who got in your way before, but you used cowardly means to do so. You could never beat my trusted subordinates with a frontal attack," Ryuuen gloated. Some of his unit happened to be members of the basketball club, the ones who'd started a fight with Sudou.

"Stop screwing around. Those dudes are weak garbage who can't even fight," snapped Sudou.

"Tough words, but with nothing to back them up. If you're so very strong, then face me one-on-one. If you can beat me then, I'll kneel before you," said Ryuuen.

"Fine. Don't forget what you just said, Ryuuen! You heard all that, Katsuragi? Don't you dare stick your nose in this!" said Sudou.

"What are you talking about? We can't let this chance go. We should use a pincer attack to defeat him," replied Katsuragi.

"Stick your nose in this, and I'll bust up your unit!" said Sudou. He'd taken Ryuuen's bait hook, line, and sinker. Ryuuen understood Sudou's personality, and took full advantage of it.

"You're determined to fight him on one-on-one, Sudou-kun? Fine. If you're doing this, then win," said Hirata. He understood that, once Sudou's switch was flipped, there was nothing to be done.

"All right. Hirata, make sure your headband doesn't get snatched!"

With a bitter expression, Katsuragi watched the battle unfold as Sudou charged forward, ramming into the enemy. However, their horsemen weren't knocked down. Their power was just about equal to ours. The horse protecting Ryuuen in the center was the half-Japanese guy, Yamada Albert. His strength was incredible, just like the rumors had said.

Miyake and I, who were supporting Hirata from the sides, couldn't bring as much strength to bear as Sudou. We both had maybe half Sudou's power. However, in Ryuuen's unit, Yamada's power seemed equal to Sudou's. The other guys were nearly as tough, too.

"Come on; come on, then. Or are you going to lose to my Albert?" Ryuuen gestured for us to attack him.

As I supported Hirata, I watched his battle with Ryuuen as best I

could. From what I could see, they were almost evenly matched. However, Ryuuen only attacked with his words, not wasting any effort on physical attacks. He conserved his stamina, responding with only one attack for every three of Hirata's.

"Not yet, Hirata?" Sudou sounded pained, since he was the only one on the receiving end of most of the enemy's attacks.

"Just a little more!" Hirata extended his arm, feinting, before launching an attack. As Ryuuen tried to sway and dodge, Hirata grabbed hold of his headband, but only managed to snag the edge.

Hirata tried his hardest to pull the headband off. He couldn't snatch it away, and the headband slipped out of his hand.

"Huh?!"

"What are you doin', Hirata?! Take it! I'm usin' up an awful lot of strength here!" said Sudou.

"Sorry. My hand was slippery!"

Sudou, breathing heavily, launched another attack. Ryuuen waited fearlessly. Meanwhile Hirata, who had only been on the offensive so far, was breathing heavily.

"What's wrong? That all you got?"

"Ugh! Sorry, Sudou-kun! Fall back for now!" said Hirata.

We put some distance between Ryuuen and ourselves. We were exhausted compared to Ryuuen, who had barely even moved. He was probably conserving his strength to fight Katsuragi after he defeated us. Sudou, his breathing ragged, repositioned himself.

"Make the next try the last, Hirata… Make sure you snatch it!" said Sudou.

"Got it. I'll try my best!" Hirata took a deep breath and focused.

"Eat this!" shouted Sudou.

Sudou summoned the last of his strength and slammed into the enemy, but they still didn't fall down. Once again, a fight between the jockeys ensued. However, Hirata took a gamble and, assuming that Ryuuen wouldn't attack, extended his arm and left himself open. The results were well worth the risk.

"Got it!"

Hirata's aim was straight and true. Again, he successfully grabbed hold of Ryuuen's headband. However, once again, the headband slipped.

"What?!"

Ryuuen took advantage of Hirata's bewilderment. He reached out to grab Hirata's headband, gripped it tightly, and effortlessly snatched it

from Hirata's head. Sudou sensed that we had lost and dropped to his knees, causing Hirata to fall.

Ryuuen raised Hirata's headband up high. Soon afterward, a referee came over and warned us to leave the field.

"Damn it!" Sudou, looking wild and unruly, glared at Ryuuen. If Sudou didn't start moving, I didn't know what kind of warning we'd receive next. I pushed him, directing him to leave the field.

"How pathetic," Ryuuen sneered.

It was too early for us to accept defeat, though. Katsuragi was still in the fight, and now that Sudou had withdrawn, his unit joined the remaining Class D horsemen to start a two-against-one strategy. However, when they grabbed Ryuuen's headband, things played out in a similar way. They couldn't pull the headband off.

In the end, Yahiko and another Class D jockey lost their headbands. Even though he'd moved as little as possible, Ryuuen demonstrated superb strength and survived until the very end.

As we heard the signal heralding the end of the game, Ryuuen took off his own headband and swung it around, reveling in his victory. That was another piece of provocation—another piece of his strategy.

"Dang it, he's the one guy I didn't want to lose to! Get your head in the game, Hirata!" Sudou's frustration was at an all-time high. I half-expected him to go on a rampage and tear the place apart.

"Sorry, Sudou-kun. His headband was so strangely wet, I couldn't seem to pull it off," said Hirata. "At first, I thought it was sweat, but something was a little odd."

He showed us his hands. Some kind of clear, slightly sticky fluid gleamed on them.

"That's not sweat," I said.

"Wait, that means… That jerk!" said Sudou. He charged over to confront Ryuuen. "That's foul play! You slathered your headband with something!"

"I don't know what you're talking about. If there's anything on my headband, it's probably just hair gel. Don't be a sore loser," chided Ryuuen.

Maybe he'd been able to clean his headband while he showed off his victory, or maybe he wiped it on the ground. Either way, Ryuuen's headband just looked dirty. The evidence was gone.

"Sudou, we're going to cause a scene. Let's head back to our tent," I said.

The referee glared at us. We couldn't prove that Ryuuen had

coated his headband in anything. In truth, Ryuuen probably *had* used hair gel. Anything else would be too risky, bordering on foul play. He wasn't stupid.

"You know what? You're at fault here, too, Ayanokouji! You need to provide more support!" snapped Sudou.

Even after we returned to the tent, Sudou didn't calm down. I kept my distance to let him cool off. Karuizawa called to Hirata and me.

"Isn't this bad news, Kiyotaka?" she asked.

"What is? Wait. Why'd you use my first name?" I asked.

"Why? Well, I call Yousuke-kun by his first name, so I thought I'd try using yours," she replied.

Then why had she dropped the honorific in *my* case? Was she implying that I was lower than Hirata?

"At any rate, I want to discuss Horikita-san. Hasn't she been struggling for a while now? Even during the cavalry battle, she was in really rough shape," said Karuizawa.

"Yeah," I replied.

Horikita was in a bad way, and not just in the team contests. Her rankings had fallen greatly across every event. The reason was clear: the fall during the obstacle course had injured her right leg. We normally would've suggested that she withdraw, but if she did, then Class D would be penalized.

"I don't really think I can blame her, though. Her opponents were just too much," said Karuizawa.

True. Horikita had gone up against difficult opponents each and every time. If she kept facing off against students who were the best in their respective clubs…

This was far too much to be mere coincidence. "It's no use. She's being targeted," I said.

"Targeted? So, it's not accidental that she keeps facing all these incredible students?"

"It's the only reason I can think of. You know how athletic she is, too, right?" I replied.

There was just one person who might order such a thing: Ryuuen Kakeru. Only he would prioritize humiliating Horikita over leading Class C to victory.

"He's definitely harassing her," I said.

"Someone is harassing Horikita? But why?" asked Karuizawa.

"It's not just Horikita. They seem to know all our strategies for the competitions, and the composition of all our teams. We're being played

like a fiddle."

"So, information about our class got leaked? Someone sent out our participation table?"

"Yes. They handed all that information over to Ryuuen," I replied.

"That's… Well, actually, Horikita was always up against Yajima-san and Kinoshita-san. Does this have anything to do with the traitor you were talking about?" asked Karuizawa.

I gave her a small nod.

"But, wait, how did you find out? Honestly, it wouldn't surprise me if you just came out and said you were the traitor or something… I mean, that's not what you're saying, right?"

"Unfortunately, no," I replied.

Putting aside the question of "who" for now, the crucial bit was that the traitor had leaked our class's information. Ryuuen knew everything, and he'd done two things in response.

First, he'd intentionally set up his weaker students against our more talented athletes, like Sudou and Hirata. Then he put his more athletic students up against our hopelessly unathletic competitors, like Ike and Yamauchi. That way, he could snag even more wins by beating them.

Second, Ryuuen was targeting Horikita. However, that really had no direct bearing on leading his class to victory. He wanted to crush Horikita for the sole purpose of destroying her. And, in truth, Horikita *had* been crushed. She'd completely lost face.

These strategies revealed much about Ryuuen Kakeru. He could have switched around his players to keep us from figuring out his plans, but he *wanted* us to know. He wanted to rile us up.

"So, you're not going to help her?" asked Karuizawa.

"How would I do that?"

"Well…I don't know," she replied.

"The participation table is already set in stone. There's nothing I can do."

"You're saying that Class D is going to lose?"

"Guess so."

"Isn't there anything we can do?"

"You should ask Hirata about that."

"That's…well, that's true, I guess. But…I thought if I talked to you, you'd think of something."

The sports festival was playing out right in the open. Thus, there weren't many chances for subterfuge, like there had been on the island.

It would be a Herculean task to pull the wool over the entire school's eyes. Our two options were fighting fair, and taking opponents like Ichinose and Katsuragi head-on, or using cowardly tactics while taking dangerous risks.

Ryuuen was only committing these acts of foul play after careful rehearsal and lots of practice. Nearly all these results had been decided before the sports festival even started.

"What do you think of Horikita?"

"What? I don't like her. She's all high and mighty and full of herself," Karuizawa replied.

"But you're worried about her."

"Well…maybe I kinda understand what she's dealing with."

Karuizawa knew the bitterness and agony that came of being targeted by a bully. In that way, she could empathize with Horikita.

"Class D is in last place right now, yeah? Is there no way for us to win?" asked Karuizawa.

"Don't worry. Everything so far has been going according to plan," I told her.

"I knew it. You *did* think of something. Then how do we win this thing?"

"Win? I have no intention of winning. What's important right now is to do nothing," I replied.

"Huh?" Karuizawa's mouth hung open in shock.

I was trying to think up a way out of this incessant questioning when I heard a very angry roar.

"I'm seriously going to beat the crap out of that jerk!"

Sudou, bristling with all the aggression of a demon, was storming toward Class C. All Ryuuen's provocation, from stepping on Sudou to targeting Horikita, seemed to have finally had its intended effect.

Hirata got in Sudou's way. "I understand what you're saying, Sudou-kun, but you need to calm down. You know what'll happen if you get violent with Ryuuen-kun."

Sudou shoved him aside. "Shut it! He's the one who should be sorry! He's done nothing but cheat!"

"Okay, yes, I do think he's been cheating. But isn't that difficult for us to prove?" asked Hirata.

Trampling someone during capture the flag and letting opponents fall over in tug-of-war weren't very sportsmanlike conduct, but they were a gray area. As for Ryuuen using hair gel on his headband during the cavalry battle, that was only speculation. The evidence was gone.

Sudou completely losing his temper and confronting Ryuuen wouldn't solve anything. In fact, it would probably have the opposite effect.

"I'm the leader here! So, listen up, Hirata. Let's confront Ryuuen together," said Sudou.

"I *know* you're the leader. If we're talking about the sports festival, you're the leader without a doubt. But look around you. What do you think the class wants from you, as their leader?" asked Hirata.

Sudou looked around, starting with Ike and the others, who cowered in fear. Most of the students kept their distance from Sudou now. They didn't want to suffer his wrath. Even Horikita looked at Sudou with worried exasperation.

Currently, Class D was swimming in fear and discomfort.

"But I'm trying my hardest for the class's sake," said Sudou.

"Is that really the case?" Yukimura interjected cuttingly. "It seems like you just want to show off how amazing you are. Your emotions are completely out of control, and they're making all your decisions for you. If you're going to pretend you're the leader, then you need to act like it and help all of us."

"Shut up."

"I feel the same way, Sudou-kun. It's precisely *because* we're relying on you that I want you to see the bigger picture, and take all your teammates' feelings into account," said Hirata.

"Shut up!"

"You should be able to do that, Sudou-kun. That's why—"

"I'm tellin' ya to shut up already!"

SMACK!

I saw Hirata, who'd been standing next to Sudou, topple over and hit the ground. Sudou, his eyes bloodshot, didn't appear to realize the mistake he'd just made. The next person to speak would probably get decked too. Actually, he looked on the verge of punching Yukimura anyway.

However, hitting Hirata earned Sudou everyone's attention, whether he wanted it or not. The teachers were now eyeballing him as well.

"What's going on?" Chabashira-sensei approached Hirata, who still lay on the ground. When she saw how enraged Sudou looked, it was pretty easy for her to deduce what'd happened. "Did you hit him?"

Sudou didn't deny it at all. "So what if I did? What then?" he huffed.

Hirata quickly climbed back to his feet and corrected her. "No,

that's not it, sensei. I just fell down, that's all."

"It hardly looks that way."

"Well, you'd be wrong to think he hit me. Look, I fell, so there shouldn't be a problem," said Hirata.

We couldn't afford to let the truth come to light. Hirata had made a wise decision.

After a moment, Chabashira-sensei spoke again. "If the victim says that nothing happened, then there's no problem. However, I can tell there's something going on here. Keep your distance from each other. I'll be giving my superiors a report later as a preventative measure."

"There's no trouble here at all, but I understand," said Hirata.

Thanks to Hirata's calm response, that was that. Meanwhile, Sudou, unable to contain his anger, kicked a nearby chair and sent it flying.

"Whatever, do what you want. Go ahead and lose for all I care, you scum. This sports festival thing can go to hell," Sudou growled.

He glanced over at Horikita for just an instant, but quickly averted his eyes and started walking back toward the dormitory.

"Things have gotten pretty bad, Ayanokouji," Karuizawa said.

"That has nothing to do with me, though," I replied.

Kouenji was absent, and now Sudou had walked off. Class D's chances looked really bleak.

6.9

While Class D dealt with its own problems, the second- and third-year students' cavalry battle proceeded. Horikita kept staring at her brother, whom she couldn't approach.

Sudou didn't return to camp even after the cavalry battles ended and the final event, the 200-meter dash, began. The show went on, no matter who was absent. Absentees would simply be disqualified, unable to earn any points. The rules were clear.

Ryuuen approached us. "Hirata, what happened to Sudou? He taking a dump?" Ryuuen had to have seen it all happen, but spoke as if he didn't know anything. Was he trying to mess with Hirata?

"Something came up. Sudou-kun is taking a break. He'll be back soon," said Hirata.

"Heh. I really don't think lying suits you," replied Ryuuen.

"You've taken first place in all the individual competitions so far, right, Ryuuen-kun?" asked Hirata calmly. He seemed placid, but you could hear him getting riled up.

"So?"

"It looks like the only reason you've come in first is because you went up against much weaker people. You're quite lucky, Ryuuen-kun."

"Guess luck is on my side."

"I don't know how much longer your luck will last, though. Anything can change," said Hirata.

"Huh?"

"I know what you're thinking," Hirata continued.

Ryuuen snorted, indicating that he had no idea what Hirata meant. Hirata continued.

"You got Class D's participation table, and you obtained detailed information about all our students' athletic abilities, too. You've made good use of that information. We're not stupid. We have a few tricks hidden up our sleeves."

"Ooh. I'd be scared if that weren't such an obvious bluff. Look at how far apart Classes C and D are now. Doesn't it fill you with despair? Even if you know the truth, it does you little good now," said Ryuuen.

"I just have one thing to say to you. Before the day ends, I'm going to show you something interesting," said Hirata.

"Something interesting, huh? I'll be looking forward to it."

Ryuuen didn't sound fazed in the slightest. He probably had no reason to be, considering that he went on to handily take first place in the 200-meter dash.

"There's a little over an hour left until Sudou's turn, huh?"

The dash continued for the second- and third-year students, followed by a fifty-minute break. If Sudou didn't return before the break ended, it'd be checkmate. With our ace in the hole gone, we'd never win. Only one person in our class could get to him.

I wondered if Horikita understood just how vital her role was. After I placed third in the 200-meter dash, I waited for her to finish her own race.

"Horikita, do you know what happened with Sudou?"

"I saw it. He realized what a disappointment he was, then ran away."

"Well…yeah, I guess that's true."

"Why are you here? You're not going to request that I bring Sudou-kun back, are you?"

"If you already know, then don't ask. Do you understand you're the only one who can help?" I inquired.

"I don't think so. There are other people who can do something. There's no way *I* possibly could," she said.

Was she serious? Yeah, she probably was. She had no idea that Sudou had a crush on her.

"Besides, I'm not exactly in a position to worry about other people right now," Horikita added.

She was indeed suffering. She had a lot to deal with on her own. I understood her feelings. Besides, pretty much no one wanted to go find Sudou. They'd abandoned him, although they knew that he could save us in the sports festival. Everyone's trust in him had evaporated. If Hirata or Kushida had stormed off, the entire class would've gone looking for them.

"Here's how I see it," I said. "You can't take care of your classmates, and you can't control yourself. What's the point of you, then? You're nothing but a burden."

"That's an awful thing to say. I'm sorry I got hurt, but I had bad luck. Some things you can't control, right?"

"Bad luck, huh? You see your injury as just that—an injury. You haven't realized a thing."

"Don't make fun of me. I understand the seriousness of the situation. Clearly, we have a traitor who leaked our participation table

to Ryuuen-kun. I never thought that someone in our class would want to destroy us, but there's nothing I can do about that right now," said Horikita.

"What else have you noticed?"

"What else? I know that Ryuuen-kun provoked Sudou-kun."

"That's right. Even with all the information in the world on Ryuuen's side, Sudou—our class's MVP—was still nearly undefeatable. So, Ryuuen needled and provoked him on purpose, until he got Sudou to drop out."

"Yeah, and that's why our class is in shambles right now."

"Have you noticed anything else?"

"Wait, you can't mean… You want to speculate?" asked Horikita. "Do I think that Ryuuen-kun set a trap for me? Yes, I certainly do. I guess he told Kinoshita-san to trip me. But it's hard to blatantly, deliberately cause injury when we're under such heavy scrutiny. I can't imagine Ryuuen and his team would intentionally injure me so badly I couldn't satisfactorily continue with the competition."

If I had wanted to, I could have offered her evidence that the injury was certainly intentional. But that wasn't really important. Instead I said, "How long do you plan to be useless, Horikita?"

Unless I took drastic measures, Horikita Suzune would never wake up.

"On what grounds do you call me useless?"

"I'm calling you useless because you *are* useless."

"How dare you? I'm a highly capable student *and* athlete. I have the utmost confidence that I can triumph over any of these good-for-nothings. Besides, since the information on our class already leaked, isn't it too late for us to do anything? It's not just me—we're all powerless here. So, why label me useless?"

"If you were an ordinary student, it would be fine for you to say that. But that's not the case, is it? If you're aiming for Class A, and want to lift your classmates up with you, then it's about time that you develop an ability to see the big picture."

"That's why I asked you for evidence!" Horikita shouted.

Our classmates turned toward us to see what was going on.

"'We have a traitor who leaked our participation table.'" I repeated Horikita's words back at her. "'Ryuuen-kun provoked Sudou-kun,' 'I guess he told Kinoshita-san to trip me.' It's certainly true that you can't do anything about those things—because you *didn't* do anything about them. And, as long as you continue to do nothing,

nothing is going to change. Do you plan on whining like this when Ryuuen pulls off another brilliant scheme? You don't, do you?"

"That's… But, what could I possibly…?"

"You can either prioritize improving your own ranking while Sudou remains absent, or you can let your ranking plummet while Sudou returns and helps pull the class forward. Which of those best serves Class D?" I asked. "There's no need to answer that, is there? You aren't nearly as valuable as Sudou right now. It's time you get the fact that you're completely useless through your skull. Sudou's methods are clumsy, sure, but he's contributed more to our class than anyone else in this festival. And he's been trying his absolute hardest to win. Is it really okay for you to give up on him just because you claim you can't afford to care about other people? You're going to let him sit this out?"

Horikita had to understand that much. Even if what I said hurt her, she needed to wake up. I wanted her to acknowledge exactly what she had to do from this point on.

"This is so obvious that even an elementary school kid should get it. There's only one thing we can do to prepare a counterattack." Ryuuen had strategically taken out Sudou, which meant that we had to strategically get Sudou back.

"You're throwing away a chance to obtain a weapon that belongs to you, and you alone," I said.

"A weapon for me alone?"

"If you're aiming for Class A, there's a limit to how much you can do on your own. Right now, you're in a situation where you can't do much of anything. You're going to face more and more exams like this in the future. When those take place, Sudou will definitely become a valuable asset. For you to make use of that asset, what should you do right now? Pray that your injured leg heals miraculously?"

Just as I used Hirata and Karuizawa as my weapons, Horikita had the opportunity to obtain a weapon of her own. It would be foolish for her to let that chance go by.

"I…"

"I'll let you think about it. That's my only advice."

There was nothing more for me to tell her. Right now, Horikita needed defeat and rebirth.

6.10

The morning half of the sports festival ended with Class D stuck in the worst-possible position. Since we were free to do what we wanted during the break, some people ate lunch in the cafeteria as usual, while others ate at a designated space on the field. The festival seemed to afford more opportunities to eat together with upperclassmen regardless of gender.

If we were asked what we liked best about the sports festival, it would probably be the lunch. A mountain of bento boxes had been provided. The meals weren't made in the school cafeteria, but were high-quality catering brought in from outside campus. Only one type of lunch was free, so nearly everyone chose that option. Some students left the field without touching the lunchboxes, though, and Horikita was among them. Perhaps my words had finally reached her, and she was looking for Sudou.

Kushida also abstained. After telling some other girls that she was going to look for Sudou, she took off.

"Gah! God, I'm so tired! Why do I gotta suffer through this, dude?!" Ike cried.

"Because you lost!"

After losing at rock-paper-scissors, Yamauchi went off to grab everyone's lunches. "Man, I'm starving. I'm gonna inhale this!"

Ike and Yamauchi showed no real interest in Sudou's whereabouts. Since they'd known Sudou since day one, they understood his personality all too well. They weren't going to chase after him.

Sudou's absence would be bad for the Red Team. Then again, some people probably felt grateful that his reign of terror had ended. Most of the girls had seen him punch Hirata. Any minor goodwill people might have developed for Sudou had gone completely out the window.

"Let's just find someplace to eat for now."

As the three of us decided to move, Hirata showed up with several guys and girls in tow. "Is it okay if we come along, too?" he asked Ike and Yamauchi.

Yamauchi and Ike were momentarily shocked that Hirata was reaching out to them, since the three weren't normally close friends. However, with cute girls in Hirata's group, they had no reason to object.

“Yeah, dude.”

Our group now contained ten people, including both guys and girls. After finding a suitable spot, we started eating. As people finished up, Hirata and Karuizawa approached me. Smartly done; with a bunch of classmates around, it wouldn’t look odd or unnatural for such a trio to form.

“Looks like Ryuuen-kun’s making his move, as expected,” said Hirata.

“So, who’s the traitor? You know, don’t you, Yousuke-kun?” asked Karuizawa.

Hirata just gently shook his head. “There are several things I don’t understand.”

“Well, I can’t say who the traitor is,” I told them.

“Huh? Why?” asked Karuizawa.

“Because, right now, we’d only throw the class into even more turmoil by identifying them. We need to deal with the traitor quietly and calmly,” I told them.

“Okay. I won’t hound you. But why did you submit the participation table to the school when you knew there was a traitor? Couldn’t we have adjusted the table ourselves? We could have flipped the script on Class C,” said Hirata.

“Probably,” I said. In truth, I’d wanted Horikita to discover the spy and deal with it appropriately.

“Wait. The traitor might be someone nearby, right? It might even be someone among us right now. Can we afford to take it this easy?” asked Karuizawa.

She scanned her surroundings, suspecting everyone at the gathering. Traitors were certainly troublesome, but depending on the circumstances, it could be more convenient just to leave them alone.

Besides, even if we’d used Hirata’s strategy, it probably wouldn’t have worked against Ryuuen. Right now, it would be difficult to make Hirata and Karuizawa understand why, so I lied instead.

“I’ve taken stock of the traitor’s moral fiber,” I said.

“Moral fiber?”

“I think they want to reform without being cornered.”

Hirata stared at me intently. “And this is all on Horikita’s orders, right, Ayanokouji-kun?”

If Hirata was already suspicious of me, then he would soon no longer trust me. Even so, I needed him to believe me right now, if only for appearances’ sake.

“Yeah. Everything is going according to Horikita’s plan.”

Hirata didn’t question me any further. He seemed convinced.

“So, where *is* Horikita-san? What’s she doing?” asked Karuizawa.

“Something only she can do. At least, I hope that’s what she’s doing,” I said.

“Wait. Are you talking about Sudou-kun?” Hirata glanced around, noticing that Horikita and Sudou were nowhere in sight.

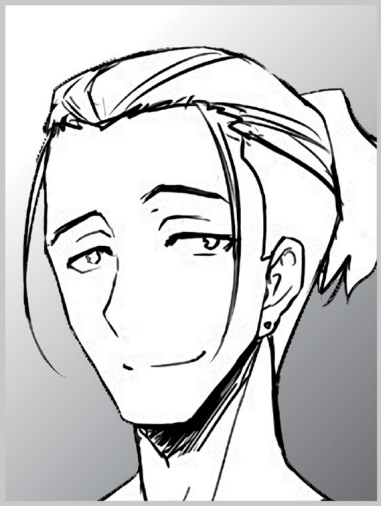
“Without Sudou, it won’t be easy for us to win the second half of the sports festival, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. We’re relying on Sudou-kun,” said Hirata.

Karuizawa looked a little dissatisfied by the prospect, but she understood. The sports festival’s outcome now depended on Horikita. If my words hadn’t reached her, it was game over.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Hashimoto Masayoshi
CLASS:	First Year, Class A
STUDENT ID:	S01T004690
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	Tennis Club
DATE OF BIRTH:	April 24th



EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	B+
INTELLIGENCE:	B+
DECISION MAKING:	B
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	B
COOPERATIVENESS:	C

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

He answers every question clearly, and is very goal-oriented. He's also adept at blending in with the group. We want to further improve his strengths.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

He's highly connected to the rest of his class. Even though he's only a first-year high school student, he has a keen eye.

Chapter 7:
For Whose Sake?

I headed toward the nurse's office alone, feeling battered and bruised after Ayanokouji-kun's verbal beatdown. Since he usually followed his so-called policy of noninterference, I never would've imagined he would speak to me like that. I'd been so shocked, I couldn't give him a satisfactory answer.

"No, that's not it," I said to myself.

Ayanokouji-kun had been absolutely right, and I'd had nothing to say in reply.

"Tch."

At any rate, if I would be chasing after Sudou-kun, I had to take care of my leg, which still wouldn't move as well as I wanted. Emergency medical treatment was available on the field, but I wanted to avoid standing out as much as possible. Instead, I headed to the nurse's office at the school.

When I got to the infirmary, I saw that someone else was already there. Of the three available beds, one was curtained off. I couldn't see who was in it.

"How's it look, sensei?" I asked.

During our brief break before lunch, I'd had an emergency first aid staff member tape my leg, but that only had a minimal effect.

After inspecting my leg, the nurse looked up. "I already said this, but participating in more competitions will be difficult."

The nurse had diagnosed me with a sprain, and it didn't seem to be getting any better or worse. At this point, I could only barely run, but at least I *could* run. I just couldn't summon up enough strength to win a race. I'd desperately fought to make it through the individual competitions, but the events for recommended participants would likely be even more difficult. If I took part, I'd never win. I couldn't let that happen.

"Do you plan to take part in the recommended-participant events?"

"I was planning to, but I think I've changed my mind. If I tried to participate with my leg like this, I'd only drag the rest of my class down," I said.

"That's a wise decision."

Fortunately, I'd obtained numerous points during previous exams. Even if I withdrew, I could compensate for my absence. If I prepared a substitute participant to take my place for all three competitions, the total cost would come out to 300,000 points. That was no small expense, but if it would raise our class's chances of victory even a little, then I had to pay it. My dream of running alongside my brother would end, though.

Well, worrying about personal issues was meaningless. What mattered was who my substitute would be.

"Thank you very much."

With that, I left the infirmary. I headed toward the main entrance to make my way back to the field. In the window, I saw my limping reflection. Feeling pathetic, I bit my lip. I did suspect Kinoshita-san of tripping me, but I was to blame for falling and getting injured. There was no changing that.

I tried my hardest to appear calm and collected, so that others wouldn't notice my pain. When I was just about to go back outside, Kushida-san ran up to me in a panic.

"I'm so glad I found you, Horikita-san! I need to talk to you about something," she said.

"What is it? I have some business I need to take care of."

"Okay. This isn't a good place to talk, though. Sorry. Would you mind coming with me? Things are going to get difficult," said Kushida.

"Can't you explain here? I'll decide after hearing how difficult this is," I answered.

After Kushida-san looked around, she whispered in my ear. "It sounds as though Kinoshita-san actually suffered a serious injury. It's bad enough that she can't even get up right now. So, that's why…well, Kinoshita-san wants to talk to you, Horikita-san."

I couldn't hide my surprise. "Where is she?"

"This way."

Kushida led me back to the nurse's office.

7.1

When I returned to the infirmary, Chabashira-sensei was there.

“Good. I was just saying that you’d barely missed Horikita-san,” the nurse said to her.

“I had Kushida fetch you. Looks like she was quick about it,” said Chabashira-sensei. Kushida-san listened to the adults talk, appearing uneasy.

“What in the world is going on?” I asked.

Behind that closed-off curtain I’d noticed earlier, I could hear someone sobbing. Chabashira-sensei pulled the curtain open, giving me a glimpse of Kinoshita-san, who lay in the bed. Then she let the curtain fall back into place and gestured me into the hallway.

“Kinoshita fell on the obstacle course this morning. Do you remember that?”

“Of course. She bumped into me,” I replied.

“Well, Kinoshita says that you deliberately knocked her down, Horikita.”

For an instant, I couldn’t understand what Chabashira-sensei was saying.

“That’s not true at all. It was completely by accident. If anything, it—”

“‘If anything, it’ what?”

I’d been about to say that it was part of Ryuuen-kun’s strategy, as Ayanokouji-kun stated. I believed that Ayanokouji-kun was completely right, but we had no proof.

“Never mind. It was just a coincidence, that’s all.”

“I’d like to believe that, but the situation isn’t good. Kinoshita claims that, during the race, you repeatedly looked back at her. We checked the video footage, and you certainly did look back twice,” said Chabashira-sensei.

“That’s because she called my name,” I replied.

“She called your name? I see. Even if that’s true, though, she claims you kicked her. In fact, she’s been absent from all the subsequent competitions. We had a teacher inspect her injuries, which appear rather severe. They believe those were caused intentionally.”

“Even if she’s badly injured, she’s still lying. I didn’t do anything,”

I replied.

"I believe you're innocent, but as long as we have no proof one way or the other, we must consider the matter," said Chabashira-sensei.

"That's idiotic."

"That's not all. The other teachers already know about this, of course. But, if this drags on, the student council will hear of it. You haven't forgotten what happened to Sudou after his fight, have you?"

If this continued, my brother would hear about the incident. He'd feel irritated and ashamed of his idiotic little sister. However, since I was innocent, I had no choice but to plead that innocence. Whether this was Ryuuen-kun's strategy or just an unfortunate accident, I couldn't lie.

"If you called me here to ask what happened, I told you the truth. I didn't do anything. Now, I have some business to take care of, so if you'd excuse me?"

I needed to find Sudou-kun as quickly as possible and bring him back. But, as I turned to leave, Chabashira-sensei spoke.

"Under the circumstances, it would probably be easy for the school to believe that the incident was intentional rather than accidental. Kinoshita-san has been absent from festival events ever since the obstacle course. If we prove that you committed foul play, that will invalidate the scores you've acquired thus far, and you won't take part in the recommended-participant events. Well, with your leg in that condition, I suppose participating would be impossible anyway, but… Kinoshita is an athletic student. In terms of speed, she's as good or better than you. It's hard to believe that her injuries are a mere coincidence."

"I was going to withdraw from the recommended-participant events, anyway. I don't mind being marked absent for those events, like Kinoshita-san. However, I didn't intentionally cause her to fall and get injured."

I wondered whether that would be enough.

"Kinoshita won't accept that," Chabashira-sensei replied. "She says she'll report this incident to the school. Her testimony, and the footage, make this fairly damning. From her perspective, she's suffered a massive loss. Class C is also in a tough spot due to Kinoshita's absence, and it seems unlikely that they'd sabotage themselves like that on purpose. You understand what this means, right?"

"It's a case of the Devil's Proof, isn't it?"

A logical dilemma as old as time. To prove that aliens existed, all

you had to do was capture one alien. But to conclusively prove that aliens *didn't* exist, you'd have to search every inch of the entire planet and of outer space itself, which would frankly be an impossible task. That was the definition of the Devil's Proof.

Chabashira-sensei was saying that, if it was impossible to prove my innocence, I'd need to prepare myself.

"How did you hear about this, Chabashira-sensei? Who else knows?" I asked.

"Kushida consulted me on the matter. She said she didn't want it to blow up, but didn't know what else to do."

"Sorry, Horikita-san. Kinoshita-san asked me to talk to a teacher," said Kushida.

"I appreciate your concern. If a teacher from another class heard about Kinoshita-san's claim, this might have escalated quickly. However, I have some questions. Why exactly did *you* hear about this from Kinoshita-san?" I pressed Kushida-san.

She anxiously looked toward the infirmary. "I'm good friends with Kinoshita-san. When I went to check on her during our break, she told me."

"I see."

It was a believable reason, considering that Kushida-san had a vast social network. At any rate, the only ones who knew about the accusation right now were Kinoshita-san, Kushida-san, Chabashira-sensei, and me. I wanted to resolve this here and now.

"May I speak with Kinoshita-san?" I asked.

"I'm not sure about that. She seems frightened, and might be emotionally unstable," replied Kushida.

"Please. I don't want to aggravate things," I said.

I bowed, and Kushida-san bowed her head in return.

"Please allow me to do this, sensei," I said.

"Okay. I'll let you try," replied Chabashira-sensei.

At that moment, I heard the sound of footsteps in the hallway. Someone was walking straight toward the nurse's office. He had both hands in his pockets, strutting around as if he owned the place.

"Looks like things have gotten really serious."

"Ryuuen-kun…"

Why was *he* here? I did my best to shake off any confusion, trying to appear calm and collected. However, Ryuuen-kun sneered and stopped right in front of us. He saw through my act.

"I rushed over after Kinoshita asked for me. To think someone did

this on purpose…” He passed us and entered the nurse’s office.

We followed him in a panic. Ryuuen-kun ignored the nurse’s attempts to stop him and opened the curtain to Kinoshita-san’s bed.

“Hey, Kinoshita. You all right? Looks like you’ve had a rough time,” he said.

Kinoshita-san looked startled upon seeing Ryuuen-kun. She trembled in fear.

“I heard your leg was injured. Show me.” He pulled Kinoshita-san’s leg out from beneath the sheets. “Whoa, this looks bad. I’m impressed you’ve held up, considering all you’re dealing with.”

Kinoshita-san’s right leg was bandaged tightly. Her injury looked painful.

“Sorry. I tried my best, but…my leg just won’t listen. That’s why —hng!”

“Don’t blame yourself, Kinoshita. I know you wanted to participate in the three-legged race,” said Ryuuen.

“We ran into each other by accident, Kinoshita-san. Why are you saying that I made you fall?” I interrupted.

Kinoshita averted her eyes. Ryuuen-kun stood in front of me. “You really did this on purpose, didn’t you?” he asked me.

“Stop joking around. You think I’d do something like this?”

“You can never really know someone, can you? Convenient, isn’t it? Kinoshita-san, who just so happens to be better at sports than you, suffers a serious injury and has to withdraw. She was going to compete in all the recommended-participant events, too. Meanwhile, you continue taking part despite your injuries. I’m not supposed to find that suspicious?” he said.

I understood all too well the significance of losing a teammate. But, after hearing the eloquent speech Ryuuen had prepared, my doubts about him only grew. Had Kinoshita-san purposefully run into me on his orders? Had he chosen her specifically to collide with me, since she was more athletic than I, and Ryuuen could deflect any suspicion?

But what did he stand to gain from having Kinoshita-san run into me, when she had a higher chance of winning the race to begin with? Furthermore, if she’d planned to take part in all the recommended-participant events, Class C would lose about 400,000 points paying for her substitute competitors. Would Ryuuen make such a sacrifice simply to defeat me and bask in his superiority?

No matter how hard I thought, I couldn’t find any benefits in such an ineffective plan.

“What are you thinking?” Ryuuen-kun asked. He leaned toward me, hands in his pockets, looking as though he saw right through me. “We can keep going back and forth on this, but it won’t settle anything. Isn’t that right, Kinoshita?”

“Horikita-san…” Kinoshita hesitated. “When I fell, you said…that I definitely wouldn’t win.”

“I said no such thing. Why are you lying?” I asked.

“Horikita, you only looked behind you when you raced with Kinoshita. Why did you do that?” Chabashira-sensei asked me again.

“Because she kept calling my name when she was behind me. At first I ignored her, but then I thought something was strange, turned, and looked back.”

“Is that true, Kinoshita?”

“I never called her name,” Kinoshita said.

“She denies it, sensei. Besides, even if Kinoshita *did* call Suzune’s name, what’s the big deal? That doesn’t constitute foul play. It was probably a cry of desperation, born from a desire to win. I mean, Kinoshita has way more spirit than anyone else. She’s strong-willed and hates to lose. That’s not a crime,” said Ryuuen.

This argument would go on forever. Besides, I was positive that Ryuuen and Kinoshita had rehearsed this whole act in secret.

“Um…Kinoshita-san, Ryuuen-kun, I think this is all just bad luck. I can’t imagine that Horikita-san would deliberately hurt her opponent.” Kushida-san spoke up quietly in my defense.

“But Horikita-san said that she definitely wouldn’t let me win! She said that!”

“Don’t you think your desire not to lose just got to you? I mean, I think that Horikita-san was really upset when she fell. I think she was just trying her best,” said Kushida.

I didn’t say anything. I endured in silence. However, Kinoshita-san spoke again.

“I can’t forgive Horikita-san for this. Now I have to take a break from track and field practice,” she said.

“Don’t you feel any shame at all?” I asked. “Is lying like this to entrap someone fun for you? Or did Ryuuen-kun devise all this? I can’t imagine it was coincidental that he just happened to show up right now.” Kinoshita-san was lying. I needed to wrangle control of the conversation before things got worse.

“So, you’re saying it’s *my* fault that Kinoshita got hurt?” Ryuuen asked me. “You really are a piece of work, aren’t you?”

“Please. You messed with Sudou-kun earlier. Don’t pretend you forgot about that. You’re just trying to use the same trick this time around.”

“I had nothing to do with that. It’s ridiculous to try and tie those things together, anyway.” Ryuuen wasn’t about to admit anything. “It’s clear you did this, isn’t it? You bumped into Kinoshita deliberately. It’s an open-and-shut case. There’s no room for any further debate, so let’s report this to the higher-ups right away.”

“That’s… Would you let me talk things over a little more with Horikita-san, please?” Kushida begged Ryuuen-kun. I wanted to tell her that concern was unnecessary, but I didn’t want this issue to get more out of hand. I was trapped in a spider’s web, and all I could do was

struggle.

Ryuuen-kun appeared to consider her request, then made a proposal.

"I don't have the time to drag this out," he said. "The recommended-participant competitions are coming up right after lunch. I'll be competing in those, so I'd like to finish this. It'd be easiest to leave the judgment to the higher-ups."

Looking at me, Kushida-san, and Kinoshita-san, Ryuuen-kun continued. "We can strike a quick deal, though."

"Strike a deal?" I asked.

"You should compensate Kinoshita and Class C for any losses."

"This isn't a joke. I don't have to listen to this," I replied. If he wanted that, the cost wouldn't be cheap. Besides, it would mean accepting their lie as truth.

"You won't strike a deal, *and* you don't want us to report this to the higher-ups? Then we're done here."

"What exactly do you want, then?" Kushida-san asked Ryuuen-kun.

"At least one of you has a good grasp of things. Let's see. If you hand over a million points, I'll have Kinoshita withdraw her complaint. That way, we can prepare a substitute for the recommended-participant events, and Kinoshita will receive some incidental income. Simple, right?"

"Don't be ridiculous," I said. "I haven't done anything wrong. I don't need to pay one single point."

"Then go ahead and prove that, Suzune. Lay it all out in black and white for us."

"You two sound sure of yourselves. You think your lies won't be exposed?"

"We can prove that we aren't lying. Let's hurry up and have the student council president render his judgment," said Ryuuen.

Ryuuen-kun knew about my relationship with the president, my older brother, and was provoking me. I absolutely couldn't do anything to trouble my brother. If the rumor spread that his little sister deliberately hurt someone, it would do immeasurable damage to his reputation.

It was a dirty trick, but there was no way out of it. Back when the boys from the basketball club had attacked Sudou-kun, they lied and pretended to be victims. Their mistake had been thinking that no one else was watching. However, this was different.

This time, the entire student body was a witness. Ryuuen had the advantage. Kinoshita-san was just as athletic as I was, if not more so, and there was video evidence that showed me looking back. Also, Kinoshita-san had planned to take part in all the recommended-participant events. She'd sustained injuries severe enough to prevent her from competing. There was nothing I could do to save myself.

Worst of all was the timing with which they'd sprung their trap. They hadn't done it right after Kinoshita-san was injured. Instead, Ryuuen had her lay low, so that her performance would be more convincing. By having her stoically bear the pain, they made their plot look like the truth.

Everything they'd done had been meant to trap me, as though they were weaving a net to catch me in.

The situation had already passed the point of no return. They'd been plotting since the moment I entered the festival. I understood the full extent of my mistake now, although I still felt baffled by the many remaining mysteries.

"Um…could I use my points, Ryuuen-kun?" Kushida-san asked.

"Huh?"

"I don't believe Horikita-san would do something like this on purpose. That's why I don't want this to turn into a big deal. But…I don't think Kinoshita-san would lie, either. Couldn't it just be an unfortunate accident?"

"Oh, that's quaint. Sorry—using your points is a no-go. I believe Suzune did this out of malicious intent, to hurt Class C. This apology is meaningless unless we get money out of her. Of course, I won't stop you if you're willing to pay up, too," said Ryuuen.

The longer this went on, the worse things would get. But I couldn't break.

"Very well. Kinoshita, we're going to report this to the teachers, then to the student council." Ryuuen-kun ordered. Kinoshita, her face twisted in pain, sat up. "The school officials should understand how serious this is," he added. "They certainly wouldn't stand for something so mean-spirited and vicious."

I had to choose. I could pursue the truth, disputing Ryuuen-kun and his lackey's claims. Or I could compromise right here. I wanted to do the former, but I had no evidence to prove the truth. I would only be wasting time and everyone's trust.

I had to strike a deal with Ryuuen-kun right here.

"Wait." I squeezed out the word.

Ryuuen-kun and Kinoshita-san stopped walking. “What is it, Suzune?” he asked. “Have anything to contribute?”

“If I pay you, you’ll make it so this issue never happened, right?”

“You’re admitting to foul play?”

“No, because I’m not a liar.”

“Well then, why exactly are you paying us?”

“Your strategy beat mine. That’s why,” I said. It was humiliating, but it was true.

“Did you hear that, Kinoshita? She doesn’t think she’s in the wrong. Can you forgive her?”

“No, I can’t,” Kinoshita-san replied.

“Well, there you go.” he told me.

“Grr…” I growled.

“Still, I know that you have your pride, too,” he added. “I understand that you don’t want to admit you’re the bad guy in front of your teacher and your friend. That’s why I’ll accept your offer. I have a kind heart, after all. However, whether Kinoshita will accept your apology is another story.”

He flashed me a wicked grin. I wanted to be free of this.

“If I pay you a million points, you’ll act like nothing ever happened. That’s what you said. No other conditions, right?” I asked.

“That was certainly the previous offer. You declined it once, right? If we’re going into a second round of negotiations, I have more conditions.”

Just how much did Ryuuen-kun intend to torture me?

“How about you get down on your knees and beg? Maybe then my feelings, and Kinoshita’s, will change.”

“Ryuuen. This is going too far.” Chabashira-sensei finally spoke up.

“Teachers should stay out of this. It’s a problem between students,” Ryuuen-kun replied. He showed no fear at all. “Well, I won’t force you to decide right away,” he told me. “The teachers are watching us, too. I’ll wait to hear your answer when the sports festival ends. Will you kneel before me and offer a million points, or will you let the school deliberate? Which will you choose?”

He added, “Don’t think that this ends with the sports festival, either. I’m not done with you. Kushida, bring Suzune to me after the festival.”

Ryuuen-kun and Kinoshita-san both left. I stood there, at a loss.

“Are you okay? Horikita-san?” Kushida-san asked.

“I’m okay. More importantly, how long has it been? Sensei, how much time is left for our lunch break?” I asked.

“You still have about twenty minutes. You haven’t eaten yet, right? You should hurry up,” said Chabashira-sensei.

I didn’t have the time to sit down and eat now. I had to find Sudou-kun as soon as possible.

“Excuse me.”

I left the two of them behind and ran from the nurse’s office.

7.2

This was all due to my carelessness. I'd only thought of myself. I hadn't anticipated that Ryuuen-kun would get hold of our participation table with the primary intention of taking me down. I wasn't prepared.

I was miserable. My stride felt heavier than before.

"I'm so pathetic."

As I approached the school entrance, I saw two people walk inside. I ordinarily would have ignored them, but these two were different.

"Big brother…" I barely whispered it, my words quickly disappearing into the ether. The school's student council president, my older brother. With him was a girl from the student council, Secretary Tachibana.

Tachibana noticed me, but my brother didn't even glance my way. I was used to that treatment from him. Honestly, I wanted to talk to him, but as a Class D disgrace, I didn't have the right. I cast my eyes downward. My brother wasn't going to stop for me, anyway.

At least, that was what I thought. But then…

"Do you understand Class D's situation right now?"

He was speaking to me.

"I'm starting to," I responded.

It was an honest answer. I'd done everything wrong, made every mistake. In every possible way, Class C had outsmarted me.

"Don't worry. I won't bother you, big brother."

I'd do what I had to do. Ryuuen wanted me to kneel before him and offer up a million points. Considering that Chabashira-sensei had witnessed that whole thing, he probably wouldn't change his mind at the eleventh hour. I was all right with that, as long as it meant I wasn't causing trouble for my big brother. But I wanted to have a proper conversation, not something like this. I'd hoped to have that chance during the final relay.

That dream had vanished when I injured my leg. I couldn't expect any sympathy from my brother, and I had nothing left to lose. Besides, there was still one last thing I could do.

"Please excuse me," I said.

I rushed through the entranceway and headed outside. Despite the

pain in my leg, I ran everywhere, looking for Sudou-kun. However, it would take more time than I had to scout a campus this large. When only ten minutes remained, I returned to the field. Maybe Sudou-kun had come back after all. He'd been trying his hardest to take first place out of the entire school. I hoped he still wanted that.

But it was no use. He wasn't on the field.

"So, he didn't come back."

Then, he…Ayanokouji-kun…appeared right before me. "You sound like you're out of breath," he said.

"I'm looking for Sudou-kun. He hasn't shown up, has he?"

"Nope. Does this mean you want to talk to him?"

"Yes. He's a valuable asset. I accept it, even though I don't like it," I replied.

"And that means?" Ayanokouji-kun seemed to notice how poorly I was doing, but there was no use telling him about Ryuuen-kun. What could he have done, anyway? I wanted to keep that embarrassment between Kushida-san, Chabashira-sensei, and myself.

Our break was nearly over, but no one had seen any sign of Sudou-kun. Class D was in dire straits already, but in Sudou-kun's absence, our defeat became a certainty.

"Do you have any idea where Sudou might be?" Ayanokouji-kun asked me. "Time is almost up."

"No, I don't. But there're only so many places he can go. If he wants privacy, he probably returned to his dorm room," I replied.

"Is your leg all right?"

"No, but I can run. Are you coming?"

"I'll pass. I'd only end up getting in your way."

"I see." I swallowed the pain and started walking.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Shinohara Satsuki
CLASS:	First Year, Class D
STUDENT ID:	S01T004742
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	Cooking Club
DATE OF BIRTH:	June 21st

EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	D–
INTELLIGENCE:	D–
DECISION MAKING:	D
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	D
COOPERATIVENESS:	C

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

She's not a troublemaker, and she's about as sociable as anyone else. However, her academic abilities are below average. We hope that she develops within her group.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

She's generally honest with her classmates, and doesn't currently exhibit any problematic behavior.

Chapter 8:
What You and I Lack

The bell rang, and the second half of the sports festival began. It was time for the recommended participants' events. Only elite students from each class would take part in the remaining four competitions.

"You're participating in the scavenger hunt, right, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"I'd rather not, if possible." There was nothing I could do about it, though. I'd lost at rock-paper-scissors.

"The problem is that Sudou-kun's not here."

Since Sudou was gone, he'd simply be marked absent. Had we prepared a substitute competitor? Horikita also had yet to return to our camp. Hopefully, that meant that things were proceeding well.

"If it's all right with you, I'd like your opinion on something, Ayanokouji-kun. I would've asked Horikita-san as well, but she's not here."

"Hirata, you don't need my opinion to make a sound decision, right?"

"I think we need a substitute. In the individual competitions, our class ranks right at the bottom. To win in overall points, we need to win the next events," he replied.

"In that case, who do we choose as the substitute?"

"We need 100,000 points to put in a substitute. I'll figure something out with the points. I think we'd do well substituting Ike-kun or Yamauchi-kun," said Hirata.

"That's because, if they do happen to take first place, they'll be able to put points toward their tests. Right?"

"Yeah. We can use that to our advantage."

That was a good plan for the scavenger hunt, in which luck had a significant part in the outcome. Ike and Yamauchi played a round of rock-paper-scissors. In the end, Ike won, and triumphantly joined the scavenger hunt team. "All right. I'll do my best, for Sudou's sake!"

He seemed to have fighting spirit to spare, at least.

The referees explained the competition before it started. "Some items in the scavenger hunt are quite difficult to procure. To pick a new item, you can request a redraw, but there will be a thirty-second

waiting period. You must make your redraw request to the referee when you draw your lot during the competition. The game ends when three players reach the goal. That's all."

After that explanation, we started getting ready for the second-round scavenger hunt, which I was participating in.

"Hey." Someone called to me. I didn't even need to look to know that it was Ryuuen.

"So, that muscle-headed moron won't be participating in the scavenger hunt, huh? I thought he'd take part for sure. Suzune's not here, either. They couldn't be doing each other backstage, right?"

"No idea. That has nothing to do with me," I replied.

"What a shitty answer." Losing interest in me, Ryuuen left. It looked as though he would be running in the second race, too.

Pretty soon, the first race started. The other classes had put forward their more athletic students, so Ike was overtaken right at the start. But speed wasn't all that counted in the scavenger hunt—the real deciding factor was which item you drew. Ike chose his lot and checked the contents.

The students in the lead searched this way and that way, leaving the field to find their items.

"Whooooooooa!" Ike struck a victory pose and took off running back toward the starting point. "Ayanokouji! Lend me your left foot! Your left foot!"

"My left foot?"

"Your shoe, dude! Your shoe! That's my item!"

Ike showed me a slip of paper with the words *"Your classmate's left foot (shoe)"* written on it.

"If I give it to you, I can't run anymore, though."

"Geh?!"

He couldn't use a competitor's shoe. Ike panicked and rushed toward the camp. However, it looked as though the other students were also having a hard time with the scavenger hunt, since no one was heading toward the goal.

Thanks to his luck during the draw, Ike—somehow—ultimately found his way into first place. "Not bad, not bad at all," he said.

Moments later, Class A came in second, followed by Class B, and then Class C in last place. Soon afterward came the signal for the start of the second race. I went to draw a lot, lagging slightly behind the other students.

I reached inside the box, touching several slips of paper in turn.

Carefully, I took one out and unfolded it. “Now then, what will mine say?”

“Ten friends.”

“You’re kidding, right?” I felt myself blacking out. Just one friend would have been bad enough, but ten? They had to be screwing with me, right? I couldn’t even think of ten people I was on speaking terms with.

“Dude, why are you spacing out? Hurry up, Ayanokouji!” Ike sounded a little full of himself, still on a high from taking first place. But there was nothing I could do. Two of the only classmates I could count as friends, Horikita and Sudou, were absent. Since Ichinose and Kanzaki were currently my enemies, I couldn’t count them, either.

“I’d like to request a change.”

The other students were already running off to find their items. In accordance with the rules, I waited thirty seconds, then redrew my lot.

“A person you love.”

“No, no, no. No, no, no, no.”

What in the world was up with the slips I had drawn? They were screwing with me.

“Ch-change, please.”

I could sense Class D’s confusion, but there really was nothing I could do. If I showed that slip of paper to a member of the opposite sex, it would have been the same as confessing romantic feelings for them. Even if I lied and asked them to play along, it would have been incredibly embarrassing. So, before I could even start looking for my item, I had to take on a one-minute handicap.

“A table clock.”

My third draw finally produced something I could actually obtain, but I’d have to go inside the school to find a table clock. I checked the teachers’ tent, just in case, but came up empty-handed. While I did that, the other three contestants reached the goal.

“This isn’t good.”

Lady Luck had snubbed me, and I came in last.

8.1

The afternoon competitions would be starting right about now. At least I'd found the red-haired student I was looking for sitting on a sofa in the dormitory lobby.

"Sudou-kun." I called out gently, so as not to startle him. He turned to look at me.

"Horikita." He appeared surprised. He probably simply hadn't expected me to show up. "Why are you here? Don't tell me you came to persuade me to go back?"

"Do I look like the type to come all the way here to persuade you?"

"That… No, you don't. So, did you come here just to scold me or somethin'?"

"I don't know about that. I must admit that I'm not sure what to say at all."

"Huh?" Sudou-kun tilted his head like he didn't quite understand. I wondered why that was. I'd finally found Sudou-kun, and I felt as though I couldn't really say anything. I tried to remember why I'd tried so hard to find him.

"If you stay out of the competitions, Class D has no hope of winning."

"Probably not. Guess we're in a lot of trouble right now, huh?"

"Yes. We're at the very bottom of the rankings. To turn things around, we need to take first place in all the recommended-participant events. Even then, we won't make the top spot."

Despite having excellent athletes like Sudou-kun, Class D as a whole was clearly inferior in this sports festival.

"And after I carried everyone on my back. That Hirata," Sudou-kun huffed.

"He did nothing wrong by stopping you from going on a rampage. On the contrary, you should be grateful to him. If you'd hit Ryuuen-kun, you might have been disqualified," I replied.

"I just couldn't stand being on the receiving end of that. What Ryuuen did was foul play."

"You may be a bit of a problem child, but you certainly gave it your all today," I said.

Sudou hadn't acted like himself. That alone was a miracle. For his

classmates' sake, he'd been as good a leader as he knew how to be. He was hot-headed, as usual, but at the root of that was a desire to win. He'd performed excellently in the group events, and I needed to acknowledge his worth.

"That said, there's still a lot you need to work on," I continued. "The fact that you're here alone right now is proof."

"The heck does that mean?"

"If people could truly rely on and trust you, you'd have a lot of classmates coming after you, not just me. People who wanted to convince you to come back, I mean."

Sudou-kun kicked the table in irritation.

"That's the problem right there," I continued. "You try to bully your way through Class D. It happened during the midterm exams, and during the dispute with Class C. Now you've snapped and flipped out."

"You're seriously tryin' to preach to me? Give me a break, Horikita. I'm really pissed," Sudou grumbled. "Look, I messed up, but I just can't stop myself from doin' it. Nothing to do in that case, right?"

"I thought you said you were going to carry everyone in the class?"

"I never said that. The other guys were asking me to, remember?" he replied.

"Even so, you have a certain degree of responsibility."

"God. Shut up, already. I don't care about that," he huffed.

"You're as childish as always. That's not going to work in the real world, is it?"

"Shut up!" He shot me a fierce glare, as if trying to intimidate me into being quiet. But I wasn't going to give up.

If anyone else had been here, they probably would have caved. Seeing that I didn't waver, Sudou-kun lost his patience and looked away.

"Your weakness is completely obvious," I said. "What will happen if you don't study? What will happen if you lash out? You lack the foresight to think ahead."

"Ah, enough already. Come on! Just leave me alone and knock it off! Your preaching is gonna make me puke!"

I believed that Sudou-kun wanted to stay at this school and do well. There had to be a reason he was the way he was. Unless I found the source of that problem, he would be trapped in an endless cycle.

Even if he wanted to be alone, I couldn't leave him. Right here and now, I *would* make myself understand him.

“If you don’t like it, feel free to hit me,” I said.

“Huh? What? You… There ain’t no way I could do somethin’ like that!”

“Because I’m a woman? I’ve said this before, but I am quite strong. I’ll knock you to the ground before your fist reaches me.”

“You’ll fight me? Man, you really are a weird lady. Well, like you said, no one else came after me. But you did. Just you.”

Ayanokouji-kun had pushed me into it, but I didn’t feel the need to tell Sudou-kun that. Perhaps Sudou-kun was tiring. He mumbled in a low voice now, as though his anger was leaking away.

“I took the leader job because I thought the sports festival would be easy as pie. I haven’t lost to anyone from the other classes. If we did the individual competitions again, I wouldn’t lose to anybody. But when people are draggin’ ya down in the team contests, there’s nothin’ you can do. We lost capture the flag and the cavalry battle ’cause of those useless guys. I couldn’t stand that.”

“I can tell just by looking at you that you hate losing when you’re good at something. But is that all there is to it?” Something else was going on here.

Sudou-kun appeared lost in thought for a moment, then replied, “Maybe I just wanted to see how it felt for people to pay attention to me and give me some respect. I guess I wanted to show all the people who made fun of me. Pretty lame, right?”

As he admitted his desires, and that he’d abandoned his goals, he scratched his red-dyed hair.

“So, now I’m completely alone, huh? Well, that’s fine. Things’ll go back to exactly how they were in junior high,” he added.

“……”

I wondered if my words would reach his heart. Ayanokouji-kun had verbally destroyed me in an argument, Ryuuen-kun had defeated me, and my brother had abandoned me. I couldn’t believe for an instant that I had any right to reprimand Sudou. I’d always considered him beneath me, but now I felt as though that wasn’t true.

Sudou-kun was clumsy, the type of person to act impulsively. He had a volatile personality. But, if I changed my perspective, I could see that he had also been fighting all alone. The fact that he’d had the courage to confront his loneliness meant he was far superior to me.

I awkwardly continued our conversation. “You know, it’s strange. My feelings are basically the same as yours.”

“Huh? Whaddya mean?”

“The feeling of wanting to be respected. The desire to fight alone. I understand those,” I told him. “When I think back, there were signs. During the midterm exams, I felt irritated at the students who couldn’t study, you included. I got angry when they couldn’t do something so obvious. I didn’t want to work with them at all. But in the sports festival, you performed impeccably. You did a lot to carry our unathletic classmates.”

Academics and sports. Different as they were, the principles at the heart of both were the same. What I’d felt toward Sudou-kun and the others during the midterms was probably what Sudou-kun was feeling quite strongly right now.

“Then you understand how I feel. Right now, I wanna be alone,” he replied.

“And I truly, truly want to leave you be. But if we lose you now, Class D’s defeat will be set in stone.” This wasn’t just Sudou-kun’s problem. It would impact our whole class.

“You abandoned the class, though, just like me. Right? So, you don’t got any right to lecture me,” he replied.

“No, I suppose not.”

That was why my words held no weight. Until this very moment, I’d thought the same thing as Sudou-kun.

“You’re disappointed in me, right? I’m used to it,” he said, dejected. “I was born to worthless people. That’s why I’m worthless, too. I came here because I definitely didn’t wanna end up like my parents, but I’m turning out just like them.”

“It’s incorrect to conclude that someone with worthless parents will inevitably turn out worthless themselves. You can’t blame other people for how you are or will be. I reject your hypothesis.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re still a nobody. Who you will become, though, depends on you and only you. At the very least, you possess incredible athletic ability. You have a rough manner of speaking, but you helped advise a lot of students during practice. That shows me you’re not a worthless person. Right now, though, you’re trying to run away. If you keep doing that, then you *will* be worthless.”

“Fine. Then just brand me worthless, already. Go ahead. I don’t even care anymore,” he replied.

“So, you’re going to throw in the towel because things aren’t going your way?”

No matter what I said to him, he wouldn’t respond. Perhaps I was

incapable of getting him to open up. The bell rang, signaling the end of lunch. The afternoon competitions were about to begin. Sudou-kun definitely wouldn't make it back in time for the scavenger hunt.

"Go back, Horikita."

"No. Not unless I bring you with me."

"Fine, do what you want." Sudou-kun headed toward the elevator.

"I'll wait here. Forever."

"Do what you want."

I didn't take my eyes off him until the elevator doors closed.

8.2

"Ugh. Well, that was unfortunate. Just a bit more, and we might've beaten Class B."

"Yeah."

Even with a substitute for Sudou, our opponents crushed us in the four-way tug-of-war. As a result, we'd been knocked down to the bottom ranking.

We tried to coordinate better as a class, but Hirata got hit the hardest. He'd shouldered the burden of paying for the substitutes, which cost him a lot of points. We were in a desperate situation, and Sudou—our ace—was still absent.

"I don't think Sudou-kun's coming back."

"Hirata, are you going to pay for the next competition, too?"

"Yeah, I am. We need it," he replied.

Hirata had paid three times so far, twice for Sudou and once for Horikita, who'd also planned to participate in the four-way tug-of-war. That was no small expense. If he had to pay for the next competition, the total would be 500,000 points. No matter how many private points he said he had, that was still far too much.

"Well, Sudou aside, Horikita should be able to repay you," I said. Fortunately, Horikita had obtained a ton of points from the last exam, much like Hirata. "Shouldn't you just let them bear the point burden this time? The participants, I mean."

"You might be right, but 100,000 points is a lot, and it's hard to save that many. Also, I'm the one who gave the go-ahead to use substitutes, so I can't exactly go asking for points," he replied.

"Don't you think the people who withdrew are the ones to blame?"

Besides, Sudou had punched Hirata. But Hirata didn't really dwell on that.

"I suppose there's the class's victory to think about, but if we place well here, our winnings will give us an advantage on future tests. It's better if people participate. But if they have to pay their own way, a lot of students will probably pass on subbing for Sudou."

The students who most needed points for tests also suffered frequent financial troubles. They couldn't risk losing both money *and* test scores.

The only competitions that remained were the mixed-gender three-legged race and the last event, the 1200-meter relay. Hirata was going to see if anyone wanted to participate, but at that moment, Kushida came running over to him.

"Um, Hirata-kun, would you mind if I helped, too? I'd like to participate in the three-legged race. Of course, I'll pay the points for it. Is that okay?"

"Huh?"

"I can't let you bear this burden alone. Besides, I want to try my best for the class, and for Horikita-san and Sudou-kun's sake."

"Since you're pretty good at sports, Kushida-san, your offer is welcome."

"Thank you. I'll go tell Chabashira-sensei that I'll participate in Horikita-san's place, then," said Kushida. With that, she ran off.

"Now for a guy. I'll ask around," said Hirata.

"Hey, Hirata. Could I go in as Sudou's substitute? I'll pay the points. I can't guarantee I'll be much help, but I'll try," I said.

"Well… Yeah, sure. I don't mind, of course, but…are you okay with that?" asked Hirata.

"I don't feel right making you shoulder this alone. Besides, I'm a little anxious about the next test. I'd like to get at least one extra point."

With Hirata's permission granted, I chased after Kushida, interrupting the conversation she was already having with Chabashira-sensei.

"So, you're going to be Sudou's substitute, Ayanokouji?" Chabashira-sensei asked.

"Yes."

"Rather unusual, since you tend to prefer watching on the sidelines."

"You're taking Sudou-kun's place, then, Ayanokouji-kun? I'm looking forward to racing with you!" said Kushida.

"Yeah, same. I'm not all that fast, though, so you'll have to forgive me," I replied.

"In the three-legged race, coordination's more important than simple speed," said Kushida.

"Yoo-hoo! Ayanokouji-kun! Oh, Kikyou-chan, too. Looks like we're competing in the same group, huh?" said Ichinose, walking up to us. Beside her was her partner, Shibata.

"Oh, wow, real tough opponents!" Kushida said. "To think the two of you are teaming up…"

“Well, Shibata-kun might be tough, but I’m really not all that special, you know? I haven’t gotten first place in anything yet,” said Ichinose.

“Really? Wow, that’s unexpected,” replied Kushida.

“I placed second one time, but I got fourth or fifth for all the rest of my events. To tell you the truth, someone else was supposed to participate in this three-legged race, but I guess she sprained her ankle before lunch. Quite a few people got injured this year,” said Ichinose. Apparently, Class B had some absentees of their own.

“Hey, Shibata-kun,” Ichinose said to her partner. “Is it okay if I tie the cord now?”

“Okay.”

The Class B pair cheerily tied their legs together.

“Well then, I suppose we should… Um, would it be okay if you tied us up? It’d be weird for a guy to do that,” I told Kushida.

“Sure. But isn’t that strange? I mean, you tied the cord when you practiced with Horikita-san, didn’t you, Ayanokouji-kun?” Wow, she really had been observing the class like a hawk.

“She’s…well, an exception. I can’t act the same way around other girls.”

“Are you saying Horikita’s special, then?”

It’d be more accurate to say she was someone with special status, but that would be difficult to explain.

“Anyway, I can’t believe Horikita-san went off looking for Sudou-kun like that,” Kushida commented. “It’s just that, well, she absolutely never cuts class. She’s very conscientious. Don’t you think it’s odd?”

“Yeah, I was surprised.”

“You didn’t really look all that surprised, though.” As Kushida said that, she crouched down and pulled the cord around my leg.

“I suppose it’s hard for people to read my face. Always has been.”

“You mean, you have a good poker face?”

“Kushida.”

“Hold on just a little longer, okay? I’ll be finished soon,” Kushida said sweetly while she expertly tied the cord around our legs.

I decided to cut to the chase.

“It’s you. You’re the traitor who leaked Class D’s participation table to Class C.”

“Come on, Ayanokouji-kun. What’s the matter with you? Even as a joke, that’s a cruel thing to say,” she replied.

“I saw you. You took a picture with your phone of the participation table we drew on the blackboard.”

“I did that to record the information, so I would remember.”

“Didn’t we all decide to write down our turns by hand, though?”

“Oh, really? Sorry, I forgot.” As Kushida finished tying us together, she slowly stood, beaming her usual smile. “Is that all that made you suspect me?”

“Sorry, but I’m sure I’m right. If it weren’t true, Class C couldn’t have massacred us like this,” I replied.

It was rare for me to be standing this close to Kushida, just the two of us. This was the perfect opportunity for a chat.

“Um, but even if someone leaked Class D’s participation table, that doesn’t necessarily mean Class C could crush us, right?” Kushida asked.

“That’s right.” Class C hadn’t been completely unmatched in every competition, which made it difficult to level any accusations. Even if they’d figured out Class D’s entire order, they still wouldn’t have known everything about Classes A and B. However, the leak would’ve significantly raised Class C’s chances of winning.

“Hey, Ayanokouji-kun. Assuming that I *am* responsible for leaking Class D’s information… If my taking a picture led you to determine that, it must mean you knew the participation table was leaked, right? In that case, why didn’t you change the table after I took the picture? Couldn’t you have submitted a new participation table later as a countermeasure? If you did that, the picture I took would’ve been useless, don’t you think?”

“Pointless. That wouldn’t matter if the traitor was a Class D student.”

“What do you mean?”

“Say we altered the participation table just like you said, Kushida. Even if we submitted the new table secretly, as long as the traitor was from Class D, they could inspect the new list at any time. Anyone in our class had the right to see it,” I replied.

“But if you hid the table until the last possible minute before submitting it, even if someone *did* happen to see it, they wouldn’t have had time to meddle.”

“That’s true enough, I suppose.”

“Ah, but doing something like that might end up throwing the rest of the class into chaos later. That wouldn’t be good, either.”

Kushida was right. If we’d waited to submit the table just before the deadline, like she said, we’d have reduced the likelihood of traitors —but also severely confused our classmates. Likewise, the other students would’ve resented us if we secretly changed the roster without consulting them. The ideal countermeasure would have been to consider the possibility of a leak from the very beginning, come up with multiple versions of the participation table as a class, and submit one at random.

“I understand what you’re getting at, but I’m not the culprit, okay? I don’t want to suspect any of my classmates, either,” said Kushida.

“In that case, how about we check with Chabashira-sensei? I’m sure she can tell us whether any students specifically asked to see the participation table after we submitted it,” I replied.

“……”

Kushida shut her mouth. For the first time that day, her smile disappeared. She'd just implicitly confirmed my suspicions. However, a thin smile crept back onto her lips right away.

"Hee hee. You really aren't an ordinary person, are you, Ayanokouji-kun?"

She laughed. This was a face I'd seen before. The face of the secret Kushida.

"I suppose there's nothing I can do, now that I've been found out. Yes. I leaked the participation table," she told me.

"You admit it?"

"Yes. If you asked Chabashira-sensei, you would've found me out anyway. It was just a matter of time. Besides, even if I tell you the truth, Ayanokouji-kun, I'm confident I won't be exposed. You haven't forgotten, have you? About my uniform, which you touched?"

She was threatening me. "No. I can't expose you as the culprit. That's certainly true. Incidentally, this reminds me—during the exam on the cruise ship, we ended up with the results we did because you had Ryuuen tell all of the students that you were the VIP, right? Then you asked Ryuuen for a favor in exchange for that information."

"And what would such a favor be? What could I want enough to betray the whole class?"

"It's what you asked me about before, isn't it?"

"Ah ha ha! Yes, that's it. You really figured it out, Ayanokouji-kun."

"I'd like to hear it from your own lips," I told her.

"I wanted to expel her. Expel Horikita Suzune. That's what," she replied.

"I just don't understand why you're going after Horikita so relentlessly." I'd hoped for the two of them to resolve their issues before the sports festival, but it hadn't worked out that way.

"I'm going to get Horikita-san expelled, no matter what you say. I won't change my mind," said Kushida.

"And you're okay with sabotaging Class D to do that?"

"That's right. I don't care if I never make it to Class A, if it means Horikita-san gets expelled. Oh, but don't misunderstand me—once she's gone, I'll unite everyone, and we'll work toward reaching Class A together. I promise," said Kushida.

Apparently, there was no changing her mind. She was entirely focused on her goal. If she had to, she'd probably rope in people like Katsuragi, Ichinose, or Sakayanagi to aid her.

“Oh, but I reconsidered one thing. I added you to the list of people I want expelled, Ayanokouji-kun. After you and Horikita have been eliminated, *then* I’ll aim for Class A,” said Kushida.

She still wore that gorgeous smile. Her expression was almost dazzling.

“Have you considered that Ryuuen might expose you?”

“I’m not an idiot. I obviously wouldn’t do anything that left any evidence behind. Ryuuen-kun is a liar who entraps people without batting an eyelash. Well, I gambled on whether or not he would betray me,” said Kushida.

I wanted to tell her that there were plenty of ways to deceive someone. A real mastermind would have found a way to make someone else the traitor in their stead. A pawn to help them achieve victory.

“Horikita-san’s taken a real beating in this sports festival,” Kushida added. “It’s too bad you couldn’t save her, isn’t it?”

I wasn’t so sure about that.

With that conversation done, we ran the three-legged race, silent hostility in the air between us.

8.3

Almost an hour had passed since Sudou-kun left. That meant the final competition would begin any minute now. I imagined that Hirata-kun and the others would put up a fight, but they couldn't really expect much.

I was helpless. I could do absolutely nothing except stand around in a pointless daze. I'd spent an hour right in front of the elevator.

Even if I returned to camp and withdrew, I didn't have the funds to get a substitute. Ryuuen-kun was getting all my points using blackmail. But that wasn't why I couldn't leave. If Sudou-kun returned to find me gone, he'd be heartbroken. Besides, despite the fact that Class D's defeat was practically set in stone, I wanted to do whatever I could. I believed Sudou-kun would come back. That was all there was to it. And then…

"Did…did you seriously wait around here?"

"You came back, Sudou-kun." I kept my cool, but inside, I was glad. I was so glad.

"It's already over, isn't it? The sports festival, I mean."

"It might be. But if we go back right now, we may still make it in time for the last competition," I said.

"So? What's the point? We've already lost," said Sudou-kun.

"You're right that the outcome is bleak. I had to withdraw due to my injury, and Kouenji-kun was absent from the start. And you left partway through, Sudou-kun. Compared to the other classes, our classmates don't stand a chance at winning." The recommended-participant events I'd wanted to compete in would've ended disastrously, anyway. "Since you've come back, can I assume you want to return to the competition?"

"Nope. I just came down here to see if you were still hanging around, is all."

"I see. Well, while I waited for the past hour, I've gone over some things. What kind of person I am, what kind of person *you* are… Things like that. I concluded that you and I really are similar after all."

"We ain't got anythin' in common. You and I are way too different."

"No. We're very similar. The more I think about it, the more I see that it's true."

I spoke from the bottom of my heart.

“Always alone. Always solitary. But you believed you could do it, and you tried,” I continued. “If there were a difference between us, it would be that one of us wants acknowledgement from a single person, and the other wants it from a large group. You already know a bit about the student council president, right?”

“Yeah, that prim-and-proper guy?”

“He’s my older brother.”

“Oh? So… Wait. You said something about fighting with him, right?” asked Sudou-kun.

“My relationship with him is far from good. Because I lack talent, we aren’t close. My older brother is incredible, and dislikes being associated with someone incompetent like me. That’s why I’ve tried my absolute hardest to become an incredible person, too. I put everything I had into trying to achieve that goal, from academics to athletics. Even right now, I’m trying.”

“W-wait a minute. Aren’t you already really smart and good at sports?”

“From the average person’s perspective, I suppose. But compared to my brother, I’m nothing special.” He had likely reached my current aptitude while he was in junior high, or perhaps even earlier. “That’s why I’ve been running straight ahead, not caring what anyone else thinks of me. As a result, I’m always alone. I thought that was fine, though. I believed that, as long as I was an astounding student, my brother would care about me. I thought that, if I participated in a ton of competitions, he would stop and look at me. That was why I told you that I wanted the anchor position in the relay. I had this idea that, if I was the anchor, he might cheer for me.”

By confronting Sudou-kun’s weakness, I’d also confronted my own.

“He really doesn’t acknowledge you? Even though you’re tryin’ so hard?” asked Sudou-kun.

“He doesn’t. But I finally realized something: I’m not incredible. Ryuuen-kun’s thoroughly beaten me, and I haven’t gotten one single result I’m satisfied with, either. I want to make it to Class A to earn my brother’s respect. That hasn’t changed. But the methods I’ve used to achieve that goal have been wrong. I’m *not* alone. If I have allies, I’m closer to my goal.”

“You’re not givin’ up?”

“If there’s a difference between you and I, that might be it. I will never, ever give up. I’ll strive to become someone worthy of my

brother's admiration," I answered.

"That sounds like a painful path to take."

"I suppose. But we aren't alone in this world. There are billions of people on this planet, and innumerable people in our lives. We can't ignore them."

A person couldn't survive alone. The sports festival had certainly been an ordeal for our class, but at the same time, it had been revelatory.

"I said that you'd turn to violence again, then coldly pushed you away. But that wasn't the right answer. If you ever stray from your path in future, I'll bring you back to it. So, until we graduate, please lend me your strength. I promise that I'll lend you all mine, too." I looked him right in the eye and didn't avert my gaze.

"Just a little while ago, it didn't seem like that was the case at all. Why do your words seem so serious now?" he asked.

"It might be because I've finally admitted the truth, which is that I'm a worthless person. I've avoided that fact." I wouldn't have said that to just anyone. "I'll ask you again, Sudou-kun. Lend me your strength."

"Horikita…"

Sudou-kun balled his hands tightly into fists, then hit himself on the forehead.

"Ah. What the hell am I feelin' right now?! I don't get it, but it's like…I feel like I've finally had my eyes opened."

He stepped toward me.

"I'll work with you, Horikita. I…I feel like someone's finally noticed me outside basketball."

As he said that, I felt myself smile. I'd never experienced this before. I wondered what the intense throbbing in my chest was. I knew that it wasn't friendship, or love. It was something else.

Embarrassing as it still felt to admit to myself, I now had an ally. That was different from Ayanokouji-kun, or my brother. It was something I'd lacked.

Perhaps I had just taken my first small step forward.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Kamuro Masumi
CLASS:	First Year, Class A
STUDENT ID:	S01T004714
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	Art Club
DATE OF BIRTH:	February 20th

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	C
INTELLIGENCE:	D+
DECISION MAKING:	B–
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	B+
COOPERATIVENESS:	D

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

Her academic abilities and intelligence are average, but she hardly speaks at all. She lacks cooperativeness. There is room for improvement in her speech and behavior.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

She hasn't done anything to drag down the class. However, she's made almost no new friends.

Chapter 9:
The Turning Point

The last event of the sports festival, the 1200-meter relay, was about to begin. Everyone—other than Class D—was amped.

"The final event, huh? I guess we need to choose a substitute for this one, too."

"Huh…! Puh…! Hey, sorry to keep you all waiting! What's going on?" Sudou, completely out of breath, returned with Horikita lagging slightly behind him.

"Sudou-kun, you came back!"

"Yeah, sorry. My bad. It took way longer to take a dump than I thought."

Sudou looked as if he was in a bright, cheerful mood—all smiles. However, many students glared at him icily. He didn't flinch from their stares.

"Sorry. I punched Hirata and crashed our morale because I lost my temper. It's my fault that Class D is about to lose," he continued.

Sudou bowed deeply. The Sudou of an hour ago couldn't have done that, even if it were an act. Something must have happened. After a stunned moment, Hirata laughed happily. His cheek was slightly swollen, and looked painful, but he didn't seem to care about that.

"The heck, Ken? This isn't like you," said Ike.

"I gotta admit, I did somethin' wrong after doing somethin' wrong. I want to apologize to you, too, Kanji," Sudou replied.

"It's not like it's your fault I lost or anything. I'm just no good at sports, really. Sorry I wasn't useful," said Ike.

"If you haven't decided on a sub for the relay, please let me run," said Sudou.

"You're the only person we'd want doing this, Sudou-kun. Right, everyone?" said Hirata.

Both guys and girls would run the final 1200-meter relay. Three guys and three girls from each class had to participate.

"Can I ask for a substitute? I wouldn't run very well with my leg like this," said Horikita. She sounded apologetic.

"Are you okay with that, Horikita?" Hirata asked. "You really wanted to be in this relay."

"There's nothing I can do about it. In the state I'm in right now,

I'm not sure I could even win against Ike-kun. Sorry," Horikita replied.

She bowed deeply, as Sudou had done earlier. I wondered if she'd ever been that honest before. Ryuuen had crushed Horikita's body and spirit. She'd craved the anchor position, reached for it, because she envisioned herself running alongside her brother. Now—though her hands trembled in apparent frustration—she accepted the reality that, if she forced herself to compete, then Class D would lose the relay.

Hirata nodded, and decided that Kushida would take Horikita's place. Our list included Hirata, Miyake, Maezono, and Onodera, with Sudou at the top. With Kushida as Horikita's replacement, that made six people. There really weren't any other sprinters in Class D who stood a chance.

After confirming the team members, Hirata opened his mouth to speak. "Um, I apologize for the suddenness of this, but…"

However, someone else cut Hirata off. "Sorry, but…would you please let me withdraw, too?"

Miyake was speaking. He looked as though he was dragging his right leg a little.

"To tell you the truth, I twisted my ankle before lunch during the 200-meter dash. I thought it would feel better after I rested, but it still hurts."

"In that case, it looks like we'll need a replacement from the boys as well." Hirata looked around, but no volunteers came forward.

I decided to speak up. "In that case, would it be okay if I ran? I'll pay the points to go in as a substitute, of course."

"You will, Ayanokouji?" Miyake asked. "Wait, though. Are you that fast?"

"I support him. I've been watching everyone, and I think Ayanokouji will do well," said Hirata.

That was all it took to shut down dissenting voices. Hirata's words had weight.

"However, we can't really say that Class D is putting forward its best runners," Hirata said. "That's why getting a head start on the competition should be our strategy. What do you think, Sudou-kun? If you get us off to a good start and overtake the other runners, I think we might be able to put some distance between us and the other classes. I'll maintain that lead and make sure the next student keeps things going."

Lanes couldn't be prepared for each of the twelve competing students, so we had to start side-by-side. The rules stated that you could take an inner lane from an opponent after you overtook them. In other

words, your initial position was the most important one. If you could get ahead of the others during the starting dash, you wouldn't end up in a chaotic free-for-all.

"Well, guess we don't got much choice. There ain't any other way for us to win," said Sudou.

He would go first. Hirata, sufficiently speedy himself, was second. After that the three girls—Kushida included—would have their turns, and then I'd go last. Class D must have been counting on me more than I expected, to have made me the anchor.

The chosen elites assembled in the middle of the field. Horikita's older brother, and that second-year student Nagumo, were among them.

"We're leaving it all to you, Sudou-kun!" shouted Hirata.

Kushida and the other runners also cheered. Sudou, looking motivated, got into his lane. The first-year students appeared to be in a slightly advantageous position, since Class D had the innermost lane. They'd arranged it so that the third-year Class A students were in the outermost lane.

Class D didn't have any chance of winning the festival, but if we were victorious here, it might help us down the line. Supportive cheers came roaring from our camp.

"Man, that was close. A couple seconds more, and I would have withdrawn," said Hirata.

"Yeah. Miyake's injury was unexpected," I replied.

The plan from the start had been for me to participate in the final relay as Hirata's substitute. Of course, only Hirata and I knew about that.

"This is okay, right, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Yeah. Sorry that you had to make all the arrangements."

"It's only natural for me. Besides, I'd hate it if Ryuuen-kun beat us again. Think he'll be surprised that you're running?"

"I'll do my best not to disappoint you. More importantly, though, let's cheer Sudou on."

The instant the signal sounded, Sudou got off to a strong start. His starting dash had the best time of any I'd seen thus far. He launched himself forward with such momentum that, after his first stride, he managed to pass eleven people.

"Whoa!" the racers shouted.

"Dude, he's so fast!"

The second-year guys and girls were left to struggle desperately for a position, and got caught up in a chaotic free-for-all. Sudou, taking

advantage of that opening, continued to leave the others in the dust. When he finished his leg of the relay, he'd secured an advantage of at least fifteen meters.

"It's up to you, Hirata!"

Class D brimmed with excitement. Sudou passed the baton to the next runner, Hirata. As a man who excelled in both studies and sports, he was glorious. The racers chased Hirata, one after another, but they couldn't reduce the gap we'd created. We maintained our lead as we transitioned to the third runner, Onodera.

This was where problems might start. For a girl, Onodera was fast, but the guys chasing her were starting to close in. A guy from the second-year Class A overtook her as she ran.

New students ran one after another. One third-year Class A guy also passed Onodera, and other third- and second-year Class A students after that. By the time Onodera passed the baton to our fourth runner, Maezono, our lead was almost gone.

However, the race was full of surprises. A girl from the third-year Class A, who was her team's fourth runner, took a spill and fell about fifty meters behind the runner she was supposed to pass the baton to. Panicking, the girl tried to get back in the race, but a Class A second year took advantage of that opening and created a significant gap.

By the time Maezono passed the baton to Kushida, our fifth runner, Class A had overtaken Class D, and we'd fallen to seventh place.

The first-year students just couldn't compete at the same level as the seniors. Only Class B's first-year students had managed to get into third place, and their ace, Shibata, had apparently received the role of anchor. He was waiting his turn, just like me.

As the fourth runner from the third-year Class A tumbled, the situation between the guys in the anchor positions changed.

"Looks like victory is ours this time, President Horikita. I would've liked to run against you directly, if possible." Nagumo laughed as the second-year Class A's top runner approached him. There was a thirty-meter gap between him and the third-year Class A student in second place. "Looks like we're going to win in overall points, too. Guess this is the dawn of a new era, eh?"

"Do you seriously plan to change this school?" the student council president asked.

"You're too traditional. And even though you're strict, you're weak. Your rules are too generous, and they stop people from getting expelled. All I'm going to do is help make this school the ultimate

meritocracy," said Nagumo.

He walked forward as he spoke, getting in position to receive the baton as it came his way. Not too long after Nagumo nabbed it, Shibata also received his baton. "All right! Nice! Leave the rest to me!"

Fire blazing in his eyes, Shibata chased down Nagumo. My eyes met Horikita's brother's for an instant. I could tell this man was fighting some internal struggle.

"To think that you're the anchor," he said.

"I'm just a substitute. Originally, your sister planned to be in this position," I replied.

"I see. I suppose she's struggling to make it through," he responded.

Horikita had probably dreamed of having a conversation with him, or at least telling him what she felt.

"I've observed your class," the student council president told me. "Up until a short while ago, I thought there was no hope for you. However, I don't get that impression from you at all in this relay. What happened?"

"You don't really need to pay attention to first-year Class D, though. Right?"

"I keep an eye on every class. No exceptions," he replied.

"I suppose, if anything's changed, it would be your sister."

"I see." No look of surprise. He looked as composed as always.

"What about you? I can't feel any excitement from you."

"I'm not interested in the sports festival. I already know the outcome."

The class's feelings.

Sudou's feelings.

Horikita's feelings.

I had no interest in any of those. All I had was a single premonition.

"You probably won't be around to see this, but our class will become stronger," I told him.

"I'm not interested in such a fanciful future," Horikita's older brother replied.

As he shifted his gaze toward his teammate, I spoke. "In that case, would you be interested in learning exactly what kind of person I am?"

"What?"

"If you'd like, I'll race against you seriously," I added.

"You really say some interesting things. I thought you hated standing out or getting involved. Why change that now?" he asked.

"If you give up your chance at second place in order to race me, I'll accept your challenge. It's not often that a first-year and third-year have the opportunity to compete like this, is it?"

Horikita's brother stood still and turned to face me. "Interesting."

He didn't seem as though he was going to move at all. His team's fifth runner passed him the baton, looking perplexed, but the older Horikita took it and stood completely still. "You did well. Great work," he said.

"Uh, thanks. Hah…" The third-year student left in a mild state of shock.

Everyone in the audience noticed this bizarre spectacle. One after another, other runners passed the third-year Class A, and Horikita just stood there. Finally, Kushida approached me at full speed. She'd be here in seconds.

"I'll say one thing to you before we race."

"What?" Horikita's brother asked.

As the two of us got ready, I said only, "Run as fast as you can."

I got the feeling that the older Horikita, whose face was in my peripheral vision, wore a slight smile. Finally, the baton passed to me.

"Ayanokouji-kun!" Kushida cried.

I bolted down the track at full throttle.

I'd never, ever run seriously in my entire life. Until then. It was as different as could be from all the times I'd run in that cold, sterile room. It was still only the beginning of October, but the cold wind washed over me. I didn't really care about overtaking the runner in front of me. All that mattered right now was competing against the man next to me.

We ran at full speed, almost as though we were cutting through the wind, and closed the distance between us and the frontrunners.

"Whoa! No way!"

We passed a shocked student and left him in our dust. I could no longer hear the cheers. Strategies and resourcefulness were irrelevant. There was only this one-on-one battle against Horikita Manabu, who ran next to me. Beyond the first curve, beyond the straight line that followed, and then to the last curve.

All right. I'm going to go even faster.

Cheers that sounded like angry bellows resounded across the grounds.

9.1

"You were super fast." Karuizawa averted her eyes as she spoke to me.

"Wasn't it just that my opponent was slow?"

"No, no. No way! Can you really say that after seeing everyone's reactions?"

"Jokes aside, I still didn't beat the student council president in the end, did I?"

"Well, there wasn't really anything you could've done about that. The runner in front of you fell down, after all."

True. That runner ended up blocking my path. I'd avoided hitting him, but the slight delay was a significant loss, and Horikita's older brother had pulled ahead. I didn't know what would've happened without that accident, but I didn't really care.

At the very least, I was certain that I'd probably gathered the whole school's attention during the final competition. Many students looked at me with puzzled expressions.

"Ayanokouji! You really are super fast, dude. Whoa! Have you been holding back until now?!" As he came running up, Sudou slapped me on the back with all his might. It really hurt.

"Running's pretty much my only specialty, but I overdid it. That's the power of being fired up, huh?" I replied.

"That still doesn't explain it, though. That *speed*. You liar." Horikita walked up to me, still dragging her leg slightly.

"You guys, this isn't how you should treat a soldier who fought with everything he had," I whined. Horikita jabbed my abdomen. "Ow, that hurts!"

Karuizawa moved out of the way, so as not to get between Horikita and I. Sakura was also looking at me from afar, but because there was a big crowd around me at this point, she didn't get close.

"If you'd run like that from the very beginning, this situation would've been different. But now you're going to be basking in lots of attention," said Horikita.

She was right. Unlike Hirata, Shibata, or Sudou, I'd held back until now. Still, it shouldn't have been too hard to plausibly claim that I'd done that as part of Hirata and Horikita's strategy, masterminded behind the scenes. That tactic was particularly effectively against

someone like Ryuuen, who tried to outsmart his opponents.

"Looks like they'll announce the results soon. Let's get going."

The results would be announced during the sports festival's closing ceremonies. All the students looked toward the gigantic electronic scoreboard.

"We'll now announce the results of this year's sports festival!"

"Red Team" and *"White Team"* were displayed as separate entries on the scoreboard. The tallied numbers started to rise, showing the total points the teams had acquired from all thirteen events. The winning team was…

The words *"Red Team Wins"* appeared on the board along with the team's score. The competition had been incredibly arduous, but the Red Team D/A coalition appeared to be victorious.

"Next, we will announce each class's overall points."

The board divided the twelve classes into three categories, and it displayed the overall points for each class all at once. We didn't really care about the details of the second- and third-year scores. What was crucial for us was Class D's position.

1st Place: First Year, B Class
2nd Place: First Year, C Class
3rd Place: First Year, A Class
4th Place: First Year, D Class

"Ugggh! I knew it! We lost!"

"Well, I thought things would end this way."

We were overjoyed that Red Team had won, but apparently, us first years had dragged the team down significantly. That was probably inevitable, though. Two absentees, Kouenji and Sakayanagi, had factored majorly into that. The second- and third-year Class As took first place with overwhelming leads. Their Class Ds secured second and third place, which indicated stability.

Unfortunately, even though we'd won as part of the Red Team, the first-year Class A only placed third in terms of overall points. That meant they'd be hit with a fifty-point penalty. Because Class D had come in last place, we faced a 100-point penalty. Since the White Team had lost, Class C would also lose 100 points. Class B had won first place in terms of overall score, and so gained fifty points; however, they would also lose fifty points because the White Team lost. None of the classes had really won.

Everyone was thoroughly exhausted and overwhelmed. Even though we'd tried our best, our class points had decreased. Of course, the students who had won individual competitions would have an advantage on future tests, so the sports festival wasn't completely pointless.

"Lastly, we will announce the MVP for each school year."

This was probably the part that Sudou was most looking forward to. If he could take first place, Sudou would likely be all smiles, since he would get permission to call Horikita by her first name.

However, the words *"First Year MVP: Shibata Sou"* appeared on the electronic scoreboard.

"Gaaahh! I knew it!" Sudou let out an agonized cry. Shibata had consistently taken first or second place in each of the events. Sudou placed first in all his individual competitions, but being absent must have had a major influence on the results. The fact that we lost a heavily-weighted event like the relay was probably a big part of it, too.

Sudou continued staring at the scoreboard in apparent frustration even after the closing ceremonies ended.

"You didn't take the top spot for our school year, Sudou-kun. You remember our promise, right?" Horikita asked.

"Yeah," Sudou replied. "It's unfortunate. But a promise is a promise. I'll call you Horikita from now on."

"Your dedication is impressive." Horikita laughed in a slightly teasing way. "I forgot to tell you one thing, though. You pushed those conditions on me, so they were rather one-sided. I never mentioned whether I had any conditions of my own."

"Whaddya mean?"

"If you took first place, you could have used my first name. Isn't it only natural that I make a request of you in return?"

"Well, yeah. I guess so."

"So, I'm going to give you a penalty for not achieving your goal. You are forbidden from ever using violence without a justifiable reason ever again. Can you promise me that?" asked Horikita.

"It's my punishment, right? I promise," said Sudou.

"Of course, you're not the one who gets to decide what a 'justifiable reason' is. That's up to me or a third party."

Sudou obediently accepted that condition as well. He might have realized his own foolishness and decided to act more mature.

Horikita slowly turned and started to walk away, then stopped.

"Oh, that reminds me. During the festival, I wasn't able to live up

to everyone's expectations, either," she added.

"Huh? That's just 'cause you were injured, though. Nothing you could've done about that," replied Sudou.

"Be that as it may, I can't forgive myself. I need to be punished, too," said Horikita. "So, if you want to call me by my first name, I don't mind giving you permission."

"Huh? H-hey!"

"That's my punishment."

That was Horikita's compromise.

"Even though we did get last place, I have hope for the battles to come, thanks to you. I'm truly grateful," said Horikita.

Sudou bashfully rubbed his nose, as if he blamed the setting sun for the redness of his cheeks. With an impressive shout, he raised both arms to the sky. "The sports festival is the best! It's the best, Suzune!"

"I'm happy for you, Sudou."

"Yeah!"

"Sorry about cutting in while you're celebrating, but do you have a minute?" someone asked as we headed back toward the school.

She was a calm, composed girl. I didn't know her name, but she was a Class A student I'd seen back in the cavalry battle.

"Would you mind coming with me after you finish changing?"

"Why me?" I asked.

"Because I have something to talk to you about. At five o'clock, go to the front gate."

"H-hey, Ayanokouji. Wh-what's going on, dude?" said Sudou. "What's this?!"

For a moment, I imagined that the request would lead to something like a romantic confession. However, I didn't get that kind of impression at all from this girl.

"Hey, what do you mean?" I asked. But the girl left without paying me any more attention.

"What was that? Has springtime come for you, too?" Sudou asked.

"It doesn't look that way to me."

"I mean, there's a chance that girl fell in love with you after she saw you run as the anchor."

"For crying out loud," I huffed.

After I changed into my uniform in the locker room, I returned to the classroom. Horikita, now also clad in her uniform, entered the classroom slightly later than I did and sat next to me.

"This time, we were defeated soundly. Completely." Yet, as

Horikita said that, she didn't appear depressed. "But I feel like I grew today. I never imagined a day would come when failure would nourish me, but…that's really how I feel."

"I see. That's good, right?" I asked.

"This class is going to get stronger. Then we'll definitely climb the ranks to the upper classes," replied Horikita.

"Honestly, this optimism is kind of freaking me out. It's not like you," I told her.

"I suppose not. It's different, isn't it?" She bashfully averted her eyes. "We're facing a ton of challenges. There are also problems I need to take care of. But I suppose, first of all, I have to get down on my knees."

"On your knees?"

The phrase concerned me, but Horikita didn't expand any further. "It doesn't involve you. Thank you for today," she added.

9.2

The students, having used up all their energy during the festival, began to leave the classroom one after another, looking completely drained. Because there weren't any club activities today, Sudou-kun left while chatting with Ike-kun and the others. Ayanokouji-kun must have been heading back as well, since he got up from his seat rather quickly. He looked over at me, so maybe he was curious about what I was up to.

"You're not going back yet?" he asked.

"That's right. I'm…well, I have some trifling matters to take care of," I replied.

"You usually head back right away, though. This is unusual."

"Well, these things do happen. Thank you for everything," I told him.

"Sure. See you tomorrow."

Everyone left the room one by one, and before I knew it, I was the only person left. I was prepared to respond to Ryuuen-kun. During the sports festival, he had me dancing in the palm of his hand. By the time I had realized what was happening, it was too late. With no planned countermeasures in place, I was thoroughly defeated.

But, somehow, I felt cheerful. I also felt as though I'd been thoroughly crushed. I understood that I was much, much more pathetic that I'd imagined, and I felt I needed to thank Ryuuen for teaching me that.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Horikita-san. I got caught up talking with a friend." Kushida-san came back in, putting her hands together in an apologetic gesture.

"It's fine. We still have a little while before the appointment. Shall we go?" I asked.

9.3

"So, you didn't run away, Suzune. You came," said Ryuuen.

"If I had run away, I truly would've been hopeless. I'm going to face my problems," I told him.

"You've got a good heart. You've become a finer woman than before," said Ryuuen.

I wasn't exactly pleased to hear that from him. "Before we talk, why don't we put an end to this ridiculous charade, Kushida-san?" I asked.

"Huh? Charade? What in the world do you mean?" she replied.

As the setting sun colored the school building, I stared directly at her. "If you want to pretend to be a good person, I don't particularly care. But you're not, are you? You leaked the information. That's how Class C was able to

pull off what they did. That's why I'm here right now, like this, with Ryuuen-kun. Am I wrong?"

"Come on, now. Who did you hear that from? Hirata-kun? Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Neither. These are my own feelings on the matter. I couldn't shake off my uneasiness. Ryuuen-kun's the only one here right now. Don't you think it's time we cut to the chase and confront each other?" I asked.

"Confront each other? What do you mean?"

"Way back at the start of our first semester, I saw you trying to convince Kouenji-kun to give up his seat on the bus. To be completely honest, I didn't recognize you. But immediately afterward, I remembered."

I looked Kushida-san square in the eye as I spoke. If she was working with Ryuuen-kun, she'd continue to conspire against me. The only reason she hadn't yet acted more directly was that she thought she didn't have to.

"Kushida Kikyou-san, you attended my junior high," I said.

For the first time ever, I saw her expression change, but then another smile crept onto her face.

"Of course you remember. I was quite the problem child, I suppose," Kushida-san replied. She lowered her eyes in silence.

"I don't think that's entirely accurate. You weren't a problem

child. Everyone trusted you, just like everyone in Class D now trusts you. But—"

"Can you please stop? Stop bringing up the past."

"I suppose. It's meaningless to talk about what's already been done," I replied. Ryuuen-kun smiled while he listened to our conversation, looking as though he was enjoying himself.

"Well then, you understand what I'm after, right? You know what I want to do?" Kushida-san asked.

"Yes. I've already realized what you want. You want to chase me out of this school. Aren't you taking quite a large risk, though? If I exposed the truth, you'd lose your popularity."

"Me or Horikita-san? It's obvious which of us is more loved. I suppose you could say I'm someone who hedges her bets," Kushida-san replied.

"Even if no one believed what I said, there'd still be lingering doubts. You can't deny the fact that we attended the same junior high," I told her.

"I suppose you're right. But if you do happen to tell anyone about me, I will drag the brother you so love and respect into this," she said.

I reflexively stiffened in response. That was the perfect defense against me. There wasn't a single opening I could exploit.

However, Kushida-san couldn't take action easily, either. If she *were* to openly involve my brother in all this, she'd know that I had nothing left to lose, and be afraid that I'd do anything in my desperation. That was precisely why she came up with this strategy to chase me out instead.

"Can't you simply ignore me?" I asked. "You know I don't involve myself with other people or stick my nose where it doesn't belong, right?"

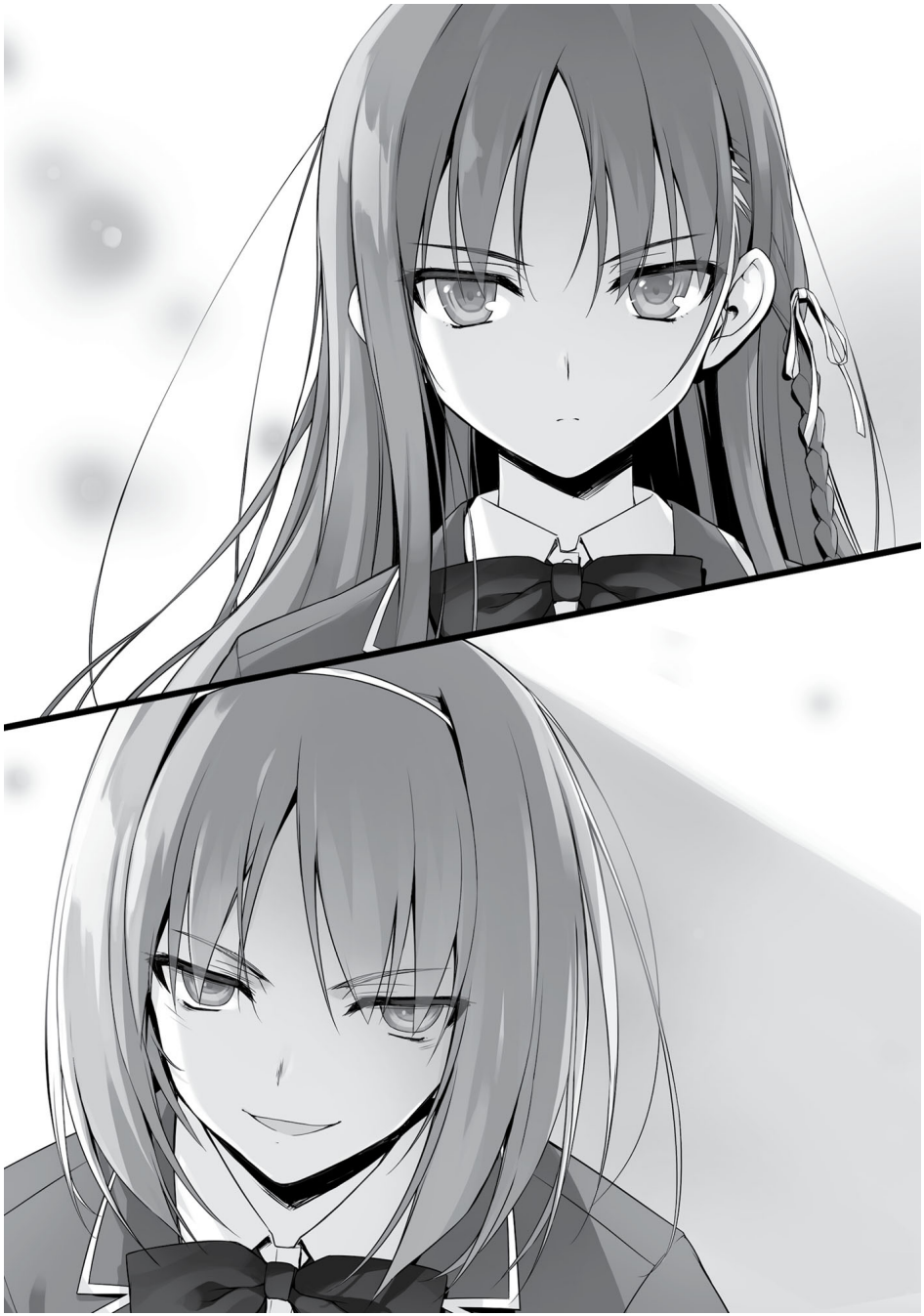
"For now. But there's no guarantee for the future. I want anyone who knows about my past to disappear, so that I can be me. Otherwise, I'll be in trouble," she replied.

"Since Ryuuen's seen your true face, does that make him your prey, too?" I asked.

"Yes, I suppose so, depending on the circumstances," she answered. It was a bold move, since she and Ryuuen-kun were supposed to be allies.

"Heh heh. What a shrewd woman. Well, I guess I decided to work with you because I like this side of your personality." Ryuuen-kun snickered.

“Let me tell you one thing, Horikita-san. I will have the school expel you. If I need to make a deal with the devil to do so, so be it,” Kushida-san said. She walked past me and stood next to Ryuuen-kun.



“That’s really a shame, Suzune,” he told me. “Betrayed by such a trustworthy ally.”

“You were a step ahead of me this time, Ryuuen-kun. No…I suppose you’ve been a step ahead for a while. The test on the cruise ship, the one on the island, and the incident with Sudou-kun… I’ve just kept on losing and losing,” I told them. The words poured out of my mouth easily, without pause.

“Then I think the time for talk is over,” he replied. “I’ll tell you this, though: Kinoshita running into you earlier was a total accident. She didn’t have any ulterior motive or ill intent. That’s just the way the world is.”

“Perhaps so. There’s no evidence, so it was obvious that I’d be framed as the aggressor,” I replied. “But let me say *this*, in turn. You were behind that incident. You ordered Kinoshita-san to make sure I took a fall. I’m sure of it.”

“You’re delusional,” he answered.

“I don’t care if I’m being delusional. But I’d like to ask you why you did it.”

“It’s quite a long process just to get you to kneel.” Ryuuen-kun laughed as if he was enjoying himself. “Before the sports festival, I had Kushida get her hands on Class D’s complete participation table. I put the right people in the right places to ensure good match-ups, and took the wins. Of course, that’s not all. I thoroughly researched Class A as well,” he added.

“Brilliant leadership. You beat us both,” I replied. Although they’d fallen short of Class B in terms of overall strength, there was no doubt that Class C had fought well. “But couldn’t you have won more effectively? To crush me, you pitted two of your aces against me, and even had one of them withdraw after she was injured. That’s incomprehensible.”

“I wanted to crush you. That was reason enough. I had no interest in winning the sports festival,” he replied.

“But your strategy also relied on luck. Good for you. When you ordered Kinoshita-san to knock me over, two coincidences saved you. One, that I just so happened to be unable to continue participating, and two, that Kinoshita-san injured herself. You couldn’t plan for either of those factors,” I told him.

That was where my world had fallen apart. If Kinoshita had only been slightly injured, the situation wouldn’t have gotten this serious.

“Your injury was coincidental, yes. If Kinoshita deliberately aimed

to injure you, that would've been obvious. That's why I had her carefully practice hitting an opponent and making the fall look completely natural," said Ryuuen-kun.

What had he done to make her obey him to that extent?

"Actually, about Kinoshita's injury," Ryuuen said. "Do you really think it was an accident?"

"Huh?"

"She certainly did fall, yes. But injuries that serious don't just happen at the drop of a hat. That's why I had her pretend to be in pain and then drop out of the sports festival. Before she got medical treatment, I injured her myself. Like this."

He stomped on the floor with all his strength. *BAM*! The sound echoed unnervingly through the hall.

"You injured…her?" I asked.

"She agreed when I told her that I'd pay her 500,000 points. Man, the power of money is a terrifying thing, isn't it?"

So, he'd decided from the very beginning that Kinoshita-san would sustain a serious injury. His schemes, and his ability to execute them, were both terrifying. He'd do anything for the sake of winning, but I was shocked that he'd speak of that so openly.

"Is it really okay for you to just blab on and on?" I asked him.

"What?"

"If I happened to be recording your confession, what would you do?" As I asked that question, I pulled out my phone.

"Did you come up with that bluff just now?"

"I bet everything on it. Still, I'm surprised you told me so much." I pushed a button on my phone and played back the recording from a specific point.

"Before the sports festival, I had Kushida get her hands on Class D's complete—"

"If you complain about me, or demand that I pay you points or bow before you, I'll use the evidence I now hold in my hands. If I do, which of us will be in trouble?" I asked.

"Wha—?!" Ryuuen-kun's smile disappeared for the first time. His words failed him. "Suzune…you…"

"I don't want to cause any panic. That's why I'd like to settle things."

"Heh heh! Ha ha ha ha!" Ryuuen-kun suddenly burst out in laughter. "You really are an entertaining woman, you know that? I said so from the very beginning, didn't I? The contents of our current

conversation are, at best, complete fiction. I was just humoring your delusions. All I did was anticipate the story you conjured up inside your own head," he replied.

"I could delete the part where you said it was a delusion and edit the recording, couldn't I?" I asked.

"Well, in that case, I'd just have to hand over the original recording. Then there would be no problem at all." Ryuuen, smiling boldly, took his own phone from his pocket. "Do you know what this is? The full audio recording, from beginning to end. In fact, I actually took video."

As he said that, he aimed his phone camera at me. It was a kind of insurance more reliable than audio. Ryuuen-kun had already imagined that I'd try betting everything on one final move…which meant that I was between a rock and a hard place.

"So, do you admit it, Suzune? The reality of your defeat, I mean."

Kushida-san also smiled boldly now. I fully understood what a fool I was. Ryuuen-kun wasn't the kind of opponent that my strategies could take down. My last hope had ended up misfiring.

"Abandon your pride and get on your knees, Suzune."

I quietly knelt. "I understand… I admit…"

Ding! A strange sound came from Ryuuen-kun's phone, which was right in front of me. I thought he wouldn't pay much attention, but for some reason, he looked at the screen.

Ryuuen-kun's face stiffened for a moment. He started fiddling with his phone without even so much as glancing at me. Mixed together with a variety of other sounds, I heard a recording.

"Listen up, you guys. We're going to set a trap for Horikita Suzune. I don't care what it takes to completely crush her. I have a plan in mind. I'll show you something interesting."

That was Ryuuen-kun's voice. Was it from a previous conversation? In the recording, he went into detail about what he'd so proudly explained to me just moments ago.

I heard Ibuki-san's voice. It sounded like she interrupted Ryuuen-kun. *"Look, I'm not discounting your strategy or whatever, but give me a chance to fight Horikita."*

Ryuuen-kun's voice again. *"Run against Suzune during the obstacle course, and collide with her. Do whatever it takes to knock her over. Afterward, I'll injure you myself and get you some money from her."*

I didn't know what in the world was happening right now.

"What's going on, Ryuuen-kun? What's with that recording?"

Kushida-san seemed puzzled.

"I see. I see, I see. I see now! Heh heh! Isn't that interesting? Do you know what this means, Kikyou? There's a traitor in Class C, too. They made not just you and Suzune dance in the palm of their hand, but me as well. This person predicted everything, including your betrayal and Suzune's debasement. Ha ha ha ha! Interesting! So interesting! The person pulling the strings is incredible! The best!"

Ryuuen-kun swept his hair back, giving a deep belly laugh.

"You were used, Kikyou. They predicted that you'd betray your class and leak the participation table. They read us like a book."

"Who could be responsible for this? Could it be Ayanokouji-kun? I mean, I didn't think he was that fast, either," said Kushida-san.

"Well, he's one candidate, but I'm not drawing any conclusions yet. Someone managed to get this recording without leaving a trace behind. Suzune, Ayanokouji, and—depending on the circumstances—even Hirata might have been positioned where they were because someone was puppeteering them. I'm going to investigate this thoroughly. I've failed to get points from Suzune or have her kneel, but I'm happy with all that I procured," said Ryuuen-kun.

There was no doubting it. I didn't know how he'd done it, but he'd used someone from Class C to record Ryuuen-kun's strategy. What I saw him do in the relay against my brother was completely incomprehensible, too. It was unlike him to draw attention to himself that way, but that was how I knew it had to be true.

The mastermind had to be Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun.

"Well, this is over for now," Ryuuen-kun said. "Whoever sent this email probably won't hound me further."

"Is that really okay, though? What if they threaten you with the recording?" Kushida-san asked.

"If they intended to submit it to the school, they already would've. I couldn't get Suzune on her knees, but I accomplished half of what I wanted to. A good show."

9.4

After I changed into my uniform, I went to the front gate as promised. Just as she'd said, the girl was waiting for me.

"You wanted to talk to me about something?" I asked.

"Follow me," she said.

"Follow you where?"

"The special building."

The girl started walking without any further explanation. We arrived at the special building's third floor, one of the few places where no surveillances cameras were installed.

"What exactly—"

The girl just told me to wait and walked off on her own. She headed around the corner and quietly whispered, "Can I go back now?"

"Yes. Excellent work, Masumi-san. I'll count on you again in future."

"Yes." Masumi quietly nodded and left. The voice's owner slowly came into view. Carrying a cane in one hand, she looked at me with a cold smile.

First-year Class A Sakayanagi.

"You wanted to see me?"

Sakayanagi didn't answer. For a silent moment, she and I just stared at each other. The school building began to get dark.

"You drew quite a lot of attention in that final relay, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun." That was all she said.

"Oh, sorry. Can I send one little message? I've got someone waiting," I replied.

"Go ahead." Sakayanagi smiled, not appearing displeased at all.

I sent off the message I'd prepared via my phone. "So, can I assume you're the one who called me here?"

"Yes."

"What do you want? I'd like to wrap this up quickly, if possible."

"After seeing you run, I remembered something. I called you here because I wanted to share the shock I felt with you. It's almost like the buildup toward a romantic confession, don't you think?"

"I really have no idea what you're talking about."

Clack. Clack. Sakayanagi, still gripping her cane, moved right next to me.

“It’s been quite a long time, Ayanokouji-kun. Eight years and 243 days, actually.”

“You’re joking, right? I don’t even know who you are.”

“Heh. No, I suppose not. It’s just me who knows you, after all.”

Clack.

Clack.

Her cane’s tapping gradually grew quieter. What in the world was this about? I decided I was done here, and turned to walk away from Sakayanagi.

“White Room,” Sakayanagi said.

I stopped dead in my tracks at those two simple words. They cracked my composure.

“It’s unpleasant, isn’t it? When only your opponent knows your secrets.”

“You…”

“This is a reunion. I just wanted to come give you a proper greeting.”

Reunion? Though I kept my back to Sakayanagi, I turned my head to look at her. I had never seen her before. I didn’t remember this girl, and I wasn’t missing any memories of my past. I had met Sakayanagi for the first time at school. There was no arguing with that fact.

“Oh, it’s quite all right that you don’t know me. But I know you. We have a strange sort of bond, you could say. To reunite with you in a place like this… To be honest, I never thought I’d see you again. But now, all the mysteries have been cleared away. The island, the cruise ship, and Class D’s expulsion uproar. I couldn’t imagine that everything was on account of Horikita Suzune. So, *you* were the one pulling the strings.”

“What are you talking about? There are lots of smart people in my class,” I retorted. I needed to be calm. I needed to get through this without panicking. I’d have time to think later.

“When you say ‘smart people,’ are you referring to Horikita Suzune-san? Or perhaps Hirata Yousuke-kun? Either way, now that I know who you are, I suppose it doesn’t really matter who anyone else is,” she replied.

Apparently, she wasn’t lying. She really did know me.

“Please, relax,” she added. “I’ve no intention of telling anyone about you at present.”

“Wouldn’t things be easier if you did?”

“I don’t want anything to get in my way. I’m the perfect person to

bury false genius." *Clack*. Her thin cane clattered against the floor. "I've found little pleasure in this boring school life."

"Can I ask you something else?"

"Please, go ahead. I'm honored to have you ask me a question. If you'd like to know, I'm even happy to tell you how I know about you."

"No, I'm not interested in that. There's just one thing I want to know."

My eyes met Sakayanagi's.

"Can you bury me?"

"Hee hee!" Sakayanagi chuckled softly to herself, and smiled once more. "Sorry for laughing. I don't intend to insult you. I know quite well how incredible you are. I've been looking forward to this. I'll be able to realize my dearest wish by destroying the greatest masterpiece that your father ever made."

I wanted that, too. My destruction—my defeat—would mean that the old man would lose.

I wanted the sad contradiction that I carried within me to be destroyed. I wished for that from the bottom of my heart.

Postscript

Hello! Happy New Year! Syougo Kinugasa here. It's been four months, and Volume 5 has been released. To be honest, I planned to get it out earlier, but it ended up taking four months to finish. "Earlier next time for sure" is what I'd like to say, but since nothing good will really come of me declaring that, I won't.

In this volume, the second semester begins, and the opening act is the battle of the sports festival. This time, the protagonist acted behind the scenes. The story focused mainly on the class as a whole, with Horikita in the lead. Someone who knows about the protagonist's past also finally appeared! Furthermore, volume five includes the catalyst that makes the rest of the school aware of the protagonist's existence. The story is most definitely still in its early stages, but I'm going to keep working hard on it, so please look forward to the rest.

Quite a few people have helped me over the last year, most of all my illustrator, Tomoseshunsaku-sama. And even though I call him pointlessly, and we end up chatting a bunch, I'm also greatly indebted to my editor, who is the most reliable of all. I sincerely hope that we have another good year.

To my readers, and all associated parties—I look forward to what the new year brings you.

Author:
Syougo Kinugusa

Born in November. Blood type AB. Primarily responsible for the scenario and PC game planning. Most notable works are *Guards of Daybreak* and *Reminiscence*. Wants a PlayStation 4, but won't have time to play it at all, so currently resisting the urge. Has a feeling that the PlayStation 5 will be out before he knows it.

Illustrator:
Tomoseshunsaku

Born in September. Lead animator and illustrator for the *Sagittarius* games. Lead animator for *Guards of Daybreak, Reminiscence*, etc. Recently went out and got a brand-new game that he wanted, but felt as if actually playing it would be delusional. Satisfied with having the game in its packaging on his shelf.

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